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CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

by

HEATHER JAMIESON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edmonton, Alberta

SPRING 1995

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled C[illegible]LDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY submitted by HEATHER JAMIESON in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY.

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to explore, from a hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective, the impact of childhood sexual abuse on women's spiritual development. Six women addressed the study's primary question which was presented to them as an invitation to conversation about their lived experience: "I am interested in how your experience of childhood sexual abuse affected your spirituality and what that was like for you." The reader is invited to explore some dimensions of the lived experience of childhood sexual abuse and its effect on women's spiritual development which have been drawn out in major conversational themes. Through hermeneutic text, four such themes were explored: (I) the experience of disconnection from body, self, God and others, (II) the experience of how other aspects of the women's lives deepened their sense of disconnection, (III) the experience of the transformative nature of pain and, (IV) the experience of reclaiming connection. These themes reveal that, while the experience of childhood sexual abuse exerts a significant influence on women's spirituality, its impact need not be confined only to its initial negative effect. Through their ongoing efforts to understand their experience of childhood sexual abuse and its meaning in their lives, changes in the women's spirituality were brought to light. Thus, the women's stories reveal the developmental nature of their spiritual growth which is seen as intimately connected to their general development as human persons. The question is then re-examined in light of existing theory and research. The attainment of a mature spirituality is disclosed as a life-long developmental task - one that requires constant openness to Mystery and to change. Finally, some reflections on the question are offered for counselors, clergy/religious educators and spiritual directors.

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CHAPTER 1

THE GENESIS OF A QUESTION

> Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Live the questions now.
>
> (Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet)

> ...the beginning of things...is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic...
>
> (Kate Chopin, The Awakening, 1899)

Introduction

To question (from the Latin *quarerere*) is "to ask, to seek, to be in search of something" (Webster's New World Dictionary, 3rd Ed., 1991). Human beings have always asked questions. It is in our nature "to seek, to be in search of something" - to be on a quest, to journey. In effect, the questions asked suggest the direction of the search that must be undertaken; the questions guide the journey which, in turn, poses more questions. Indeed, it may be said that the questions are the journey and the journey shapes the story just as story is shaped by the journey.

Questions about childhood sexual abuse first started to come to the forefront of social science investigation in the late seventies. My own questions about sexual abuse were first sparked by the story of a fifteen-year old girl who reported to me that she had been sexually abused by her father. "Katy" didn't know or use the words "sexual abuse" but what she described was unmistakable. In relating how the abuse by her father had affected her life, powerful conflicting images were revealed. Katy expressed a deep hatred for herself and for her body and a repugnance for men. She hated her father but she also loved him. She wanted to die but was also desperate to live. She wanted to connect deeply with someone but was afraid to trust. Her father's breach of trust led Katy to believe that God was a lie; that prayers don't get answered. An honours student, a good musician and competent leader, Katy saw herself only as a failure, as unworthy, as not good enough.

The year was 1980 and I was a high school counselor in an all girls high school. Up to that time, most of what I had formally learned about sexual abuse was theoretical and objective - statistics, victim profiles, abuser profiles and the like. In the years since I met Katy I have heard many stories similar to hers - stories driven by images which reveal real events in the lives of real people. One adult survivor of sexual abuse told me - "I learned in the Bible that 'whatever you ask for in my name will be given to you'. Well, I asked. I prayed to God to stop what was happening but nothing changed. I can't understand how God could allow such terrible things to happen to children." Another noted "all during my childhood my family always went to church. The love of God that I heard so much about was beyond my understanding. Even while my grandfather continued to abuse me, we went to church every Sunday. I didn't feel that God or anyone else loved me or ever could." Another observed that "it's taken me years to undo the damage that was done.

Everyone of these scars on my wrists is a visible reminder of how hard it has been for me to really 'choose life'. But I am learning little by little to choose my life every day and for now that's enough. Maybe one day I will also learn the larger meaning and purpose of my life."

These stories went beyond the cold facts mined by research. Questions having a broad ontological context were latent in them: Who am I? Who am I meant to be? What sort of person am I meant to be? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? of relationship? What sort of world is this? Who or What can I trust? Out of these stories, questions about how sexual abuse and spirituality related to one another arose for me and kept returning to me. Thus, through my clinical experience, this study was grounded in a personal way.

Today we are more knowledgeable about childhood sexual abuse than we were when I first met Katy. It is now clear that the impact of child sexual abuse may be felt in virtually every aspect of the survivor's life. The literature on sexual abuse, reviewed in chapter two, is replete with studies, clinical and empirical, that confirm the social, psychological and personal problems associated with such abuse.

Cultural Context Within Which Survivors Live

The female survivor, as a woman today, lives in a time of rapid and significant change. Women are speaking in the public realm about what they once kept hidden or acknowledged only in the private domain. The questions that a small number of women dared to ask about the reality of childhood sexual abuse as little as twenty years ago are being asked by an ever-widening circle of women. These voices speak from a myriad of perspectives (Sewell, 1991). They arise out of the everyday lived experience of women which has many shapes and which may not be entirely encompassed by naming it "female". However, what these varied perspectives have in common is their questioning of the established assumptions, the standard answers of patriarchy which relegated women to private spaces and kept their voices out of public discourse. These assumptions, which are metaphysical, gave rise to a model of power that is one of domination and control; its concrete expression is embedded in our institutions and language. It is a "power over" that has allowed for sexual abuse to occur and which, until recently, stifled the questions and silenced the stories of its victims (Johnson, 1992; Noddings, 1989).

Women's stories arise out of their lived experience. Through sharing their stories, female survivors have begun to realize that their childhood experiences of sexual abuse were not their personal failure or fault. They have also discovered that their experiences were shared by others. Sharing their stories, women reveal to one another the common threads of their lives (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Heilbrun, 1991; Sewell, 1991). They speak of suffering and of joy; of pain and of hope; of death and of life; of brokenness and of healing; of male and of female; of solitude and of communion (Sewell, 1991). Their stories reveal that life is not about "either/or" but "both/and".

Through sharing their stories with one another, female survivors of childhood sexual abuse are breaking the silence imposed by their abuse and are finally being heard. Their stories raise questions - questions that ask how to define the sacred in their lives; how to

celebrate the sacred; how relevant traditional views of spirituality are for women's experience; how women's experience shapes their spirituality and its expression. Their questions also ask how to make meaning out of suffering - out of the experience of childhood sexual abuse; how to heal their woundedness; how to learn the true meaning of forgiveness; how to care for and love themselves; how to change things.

Contemporary Upsurge of Interest in Spirituality

It is not only an interest in understanding childhood sexual abuse and the accompanying questions about it that has been growing. In the past decade, there has also been a renewed interest in and questioning about spirituality (one of the central concerns to be explored in chapter two). Numerous authors (Puls, 1988; Fischer, 1990; Grof and Grof, 1990; Capra and Steindl-Rast, 1991; May, 1982/1992; Moore, 1992; Simpkinson and Simpkinson (eds.), 1993; Keen, 1994; Hague, 1995) from several fields including psychology, theology, counselling and religious education have sought to address the question of what is spirituality. Many have also tried to show its practical relevance in their own lives as well as in the lives of those whom they teach, counsel and direct.

In the area of women's spirituality, several recent works by women authors have appeared (Harris, 1989; Baldwin, 1990; Murdock, 1990; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Sewell et al, 1991). These books look at how women define the sacred in their lives and offer women from all walks of life ways to think about their own spirituality through story, poetry, various exercises or by examining the various spiritual paths that women - some historical, others contemporary - have chosen. Because they speak to the wider question of women's spirituality, they offer helpful general viewpoints that assist the reader to expand and deepen his or her own understanding of women's spirituality. What they do not offer is a perspective on spirituality as it relates to childhood sexual abuse.

Smith's (1993) study addressed the question of whether abuse or maltreatment in childhood affects the spiritual development of women religious.[1] Smith "addressed the possibility that analogous to the other lines of development which are affected by abuse...the spiritual line of development may also be affected by the experience of abuse or maltreatment" (p.12). Through questionnaires and the administration of Genia's (1991) Spiritual Experience Index to women religious and lay women, Smith concluded that childhood sexual abuse negatively affects women's spiritual development by impeding "the natural process of spiritual maturing" (p.95). How the negative effects show themselves in women's lives or how the women understand them was not the focus of Smith's study; thus, such discussion is absent from it.

---

[1] Women religious refers to those women in the Roman Catholic tradition who live what is commonly called the "religious life" and who vow poverty, chastity and obedience.

The Focus and Approach of This Study

The question of this study is *how does the experience of childhood sexual abuse affect the spiritual development of the female adult survivor?*. This question, however implies others. How does her childhood understanding of spirituality meet her experience of sexual abuse? How does the experience of sexual abuse fit into her wider experience of which it is a significant part? What kind of spirituality emerges from the experience of childhood sexual abuse? What impact does it have on the female adult survivor's self-identity, her relationships with herself and others? How does she use her spirituality to integrate the losses imposed by the experience of abuse?

Hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus of chapter three, was the approach which guided this study (van Manen, 1990). It was deemed an appropriate vehicle for this exploration primarily because it gives primacy to lived experience and seeks to discover the meaning of that lived experience. Six women gathered their lived experiences of childhood sexual abuse and its impact on their spirituality from within themselves. Their gathered recollections were revealed as stories which they shared as part of the study. The meanings of these remembered descriptions were explored through questions and interpretation which were later made explicit in the text of chapters four through seven. Some reflection on the practical implications of the women's experience is offered in the eighth and final chapter.

In reviewing the literature, I was looking for women's own accounts of how their experience of childhood sexual abuse affected their spirituality. I wanted to go beyond mainstream research. Such research, important as it is, shrinks the experience of childhood sexual abuse to facts and figures; it fragments it. I was interested in knowing how female adult survivors' understanding of themselves differed from the researchers' "scientific" understanding of them. The stories of the women whom I interviewed became the vehicle through which their understanding would be revealed. I also wanted to know if and how their spirituality changed as they came to terms with their childhood experience. I wanted to know "what is this experience like? What is its significance for their spiritual development?" Such accounts were absent from the literature. The accounts of the women interviewed for this study, therefore, help open a window on our understanding of sexual abuse and the nature of the impact it exerts on the female adult survivor's spirituality.

CHAPTER 2

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE QUESTION

> Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy.
>
> (Emerson; Nature: Intro., p. 836, 1849)

> The growth of understanding follows an ascending spiral rather than a straight line.
>
> (Joanna Field, A Life of One's Own, 1934)

Introduction

In the present chapter, current perspectives on spirituality, development and childhood sexual abuse will be put forth. In the first section, a description of spirituality that helps clarify its meaning and which also distinguishes it from religion will be provided. Following this, an overview of theories of human development will be given. Spiritual development will be presented within the context of human development. Finally, there is a summary of information about the potential effects of childhood sexual abuse on human development. Though much has already been written about sexual abuse, current understandings of its effects have generally failed to address its impact on survivors' spiritual development. Where connections between sexual abuse, spirituality and development have already been suggested or established, they will be delineated.

Spirituality

Assagioli (1971), Frankl (1959, 1975), James (1890/1961, 1902/1981), Jung (1933, 1938, 1963), Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1961) were among the pioneers in the field of behavioural science who explored the concept of spirituality and recognized its place as a therapeutic factor in the helping arts. In the last two decades, interest in spirituality has again surfaced especially in the works of transpersonal therapists. Writers such as Butler (1990), Dass (1978), Grof (1988), Hendricks and Weinhold (1982), Tart (1986, 1990) and Wilber (1980; 1983) encourage a therapeutic exploration of spirituality and extend their exploration into Eastern as well as Western worldviews. Similarly, Chandler et al. (1992) and Witmer and Sweeney (1992) have placed spirituality at the core of "wellness".

One of the difficulties in understanding and speaking about spirituality is that the term itself is value-laden and definitions for spirituality are often implicit or do not go beyond generalized descriptions (Ellis, 1992). Friedman (1993) described the word "spirituality" as a Rorschach word because, as he points out, it means many things to many people. Mahar and Hunt (1993) concur with Moberg (1984) noting that spirituality is a multidimensional construct whose richness and breadth have been limited by reference to only a few specific dimensions.

In searching the literature, I came across many recent interpretations of spirituality that support the assertions of Mahar/Hunt and Friedman. The following is but a sampling of the many definitions I located which characterized spirituality as: the personal journey toward union with God (Mcgill and McGreal, 1988); a belief in a force greater than self (Witmer, 1989); an "inner attitude that emphasizes energy, creative choice, and a powerful force for living" (Booth, 1992, p.25); the "source of our yearning as well as our very life" (May, 1988, p.65); a "compassion" which is "passionate and caring" (Fox, 1991, p. 21); "a way of being and experiencing that comes through awareness of a transcendent dimension" (Elkins et al., 1988, p.10); "the sacred centre out of which all life comes" (Baldwin, 1991, p.3); "a constant expansion of the divine potential that is the very constituent of being human" (Brewi and Brennan, 1988, p.63); a "dance of the Spirit" (Harris, 1989, p. xii).

The word "spirit", from the Latin "spiritus", is an attempt to translate the Greek noun "pneuma" (Sheldrake, 1992) and is variously translated as breath, courage, vigour or life (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1993). "Spiritual", the adjective derived from "spirit", has its roots in the Latin "spiritualis" meaning "of the spirit". Thus, it follows that spirituality is that which has a spiritual quality or character. The nature of this character, however, is not clarified by an examination of etymology alone. The origins of the word seem to hint at an important dimension of spirituality but do not fully unravel its meaning.

Spirituality: a definition and a description

In searching for a way to define spirituality, I wanted a definition and/or description that would promote a clearer understanding of spirituality and which would also be broad enough to encompass an assortment of viewpoints. The following definition was chosen because it seemed best to solicit what I was seeking. Spirituality, as defined here, refers to "the life principle that pervades a person's entire being, one's volitional, emotional, moral-ethical, intellectual, and physical dimensions and generates a capacity for transcendent values...the spiritual dimension of a person integrates and transcends the biological and psychological nature" (Burns, 1991, p.2). For the majority of people, the actualization of transcendence is connected with whatever is acknowledged as the "Ultimate" or "Holy" or "God" (Dailey, 1992).

Ellison (1983) observed that words are often inadequate to the full explication of spirituality. He suggested that through observing the states directly affected by spirituality, one could better understand it. One of those states he referred to as spiritual well-being. In Ellison's view, spiritual well-being is an indicator of spiritual health in much the same way that body temperature is an indication of physical health. Spirituality, according to this view, has many dimensions. Similarly, a descriptive element was added to the definition of spirituality by Elkins et al (1988) who, from their research, distilled nine major components which they believe are core dimensions of a *mature* spirituality. The following dimensions of spirituality, a composite of those proposed by Elkins as well as others, are included here because they aid the task of understanding spirituality by making explicit

what various authors have implied about it and because they release the definition chosen from having a "last word" status.

Transcendent Dimension

Spirituality includes a transcendent dimension (Elkins, 1988; Genia, 1990) which may be oriented toward a God or no god, "peak experiences" (Maslow, 1970) or "a natural extension of the self into the regions of the unconscious or Greater Self" (Elkins, 1988, p.10). However the transcendent is conceived, the person believes that there is more to life than meets the eye and that contact with that "more", which is one's final fulfillment, is deemed to be beneficial (Rahner, 1983).

Meaning and Purposefulness

Elkins found spirituality to encompass a quest for meaning and purposefulness. A person on such a quest moves increasingly toward "an authentic sense" that life has deep meaning and one's own life has purpose (Genia, 1990, 1991; Rahner, 1983). Frankl (1948, 1958) conceived of meaning as that which gives purpose to life and noted that the search for an ultimate meaning in life is innate to human beings. The question of meaning may arise at any time in an individual's life but is more likely to emerge in times of crisis. It may also be derived from the experience of beauty which can occasion a "creation ecstasy" (Fox, 1981, p.45) in which self-transcendence and renewal are experienced.

Vocation

The spiritually mature person "feels a sense of responsibility to life" (Elkins, 1988, p.11) and believes there is some mission to fulfill, some vocation or call to answer.

Life as sacred

Spirituality is reflected in an attitude that sees all life as sacred. There is no separation between "sacred" and "profane". Believing that all life is holy, the spiritual person encounters and celebrates the sacred in the everyday aspects of her life (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Moore, 1992) and, in so doing, often experiences wonder and awe at life's mystery (Baldwin, 1991; Elkins, 1988).

Right relationship with material goods

A spiritually mature person recognizes that, while certain material goods are necessary for life in our world, there is a "more" to life and that that "more" will not be satisfied by accumulation of material things (Elkins, 1988).

Belief in and commitment to social justice

Spirituality leads to a respect for and practice of altruistic love (Genia, 1990; Elkins, 1988). The spiritually developed person recognizes that there is an interconnectedness among self, others, the Infinite and creation (Moore, 1992; Baldwin, 1990; Elkins, 1988). Responsibility is not for oneself alone but also for others and is lived through a commitment to alleviate suffering wherever it occurs (Genia, 1990; Elkins, 1988). This commitment extends not only to those who live on the earth but to the suffering of the world itself (Hague, 1995; Capra and Steindl-Rast, 1992; Anderson and Hopkins, 1991).

Idealism

Spirituality leads to visionary thinking and idealism. While loving things for what they are, the spiritual person also desires the betterment of the world, for things as they can and ought to be and strives for "the positive actualization of potential in all aspects of life" (Elkins, 1988, p.11).

Tolerance for and acceptance of life's ambiguity

The spiritually mature person does not seek "black and white" answers to life's questions but is able to live in doubt and ambiguity (Elkins, 1988; Genia, 1990) and recognizes that such a state is inescapable (Genia, 1990; Kurtz and Ketcham, 1992). Out of this awareness comes a receptivity to and an acceptance of self, of others and of the challenges (suffering, pain, brokenness) which life presents (Elkins, 1988; Genia, 1990; Moore, 1992; Nouwen, 1986, 1987; Rahner, 1983; Ulanov, 1981). While such receptivity and acceptance create "an existential seriousness toward life" (Elkins, 1988, p.12), they also engender hope (Rahner, 1983), joy, appreciation (Elkins, 1988), and gratitude (Kurtz and Ketcham, 1992).

Transformation

Spirituality brings change to a person's life and is manifest in the discernible positive effects (Genia, 1990; 1991; Kurtz and Ketcham, 1992) on a person's "relationship to self, others, nature, life and ... the Ultimate" (Elkins, 1988, p.12). Compassion, respect for diversity, caring, a greater sense of connectedness, an openness to others and to life are all fruits of a spiritual life (Genia, 1990; Elkins, 1988).

Religion and Spirituality

If an expanded definition of spirituality that delineates nine core dimensions provides a better understanding of spirituality, what then is the relationship between spirituality and religion - are they the same thing? In the minds of most people, "spirituality has been inextricably linked with organized religion" (Mahar and Hunt, 1993,p. 22). Although the

terms "religion" and "spirituality" are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished from one another. In an attempt to clarify the differences, Legere (1984) placed spirituality in the realm of "experience" and defined religion as the "conceptualization of that experience". He stated that "Spirituality focuses on what happens in the heart; religion tries to codify and capture that experience in a system" (p.376). Vaughan (1991) offered the following differentiation: "Whereas spirituality is essentially a subjective experience of the sacred, religion involves subscribing to a set of beliefs or doctrines that are institutionalized" (p. 105). Marty (1991) made two distinctions between religion and spirituality: whereas religion provides for social identity, the personal nature of spirituality may not and religion's corporate nature may allow for less variation of stipulated behaviours than a personal spirituality. What these authors have in common is their emphasis on spirituality as a personal experience. Such an experience may or may not find its expression in religion. Elkins (1988) observed that "At its best, formal religion is the incubator and reservoir of the world's most vital spiritual values". For many people today, traditional religion remains the nurturer and the channel of expression for their spirituality. For many others, it is not (Price and Simpkinson, 1993, p.12). However, this does not mean "that we have to give up concern for the soul if we do not accept the tenets of religion" (Fromm, 1950, p.9). Maslow (1970) reminds us that "spiritual values have a naturalistic meaning" and "are the general responsibility of all mankind" (p.33); thus, spirituality is an inherent quality of all human beings (Haase et al., 1992) and must be addressed if one is to be whole (Hague, 1995).

It is relatively easy to point out differences between various religions. Their creeds, dogmas, rituals and so forth are clearly distinguishable from one another. On the surface, it may appear that religion and spirituality are distinguishable from one another only in the ways already outlined and that there is some reality that might be called "universal" or "generic" spirituality. Such is not the case. While common attributes may be found between one person's spirituality and another's, the expressions of their spirituality may differ. John Garvey (1990, p. 240-241) clarifies this point well through his appropriation of an image first put forth by Wittgenstein:

> The belief that when we peel away cultural encrustations we will arrive at the essence of a tradition or a culture assumes that whatever was there at the beginning was pure, and all later additions or amendments are corrupting or are sidetracks...To paraphrase a metaphor Wittgenstein used in another context: we may peel away the leaves to try to get at the essence of the artichoke, and find that the leaves were what the artichoke was about.

Implicit in the preceding is the idea that spirituality is something that develops throughout the life span. If characteristics of a "mature", that is, integrated, spirituality can be delineated, one can assume that spiritual development is a process - a process toward integration or wholeness. The idea of spirituality or religion as process is one, as we shall see in the next section, that psychologists, among others, have helped us to appreciate. Individuals at different stages of their development will understand and practice their

spirituality/religion in ways that reflect their overall development. Thus, spirituality not only differs from one person to another but also manifests itself differently at different times within the same individual. In other words, as William James noted, there are many "varieties of religious experience."

Theories of Development

Theories of human development may be divided into distinct approaches. These approaches, which give rise to different paradigms, are attempts to answer the question of how self-change and growth occur over the span of a lifetime. Generally speaking, most paradigms "emphasize either continuous, quantitative change or discontinuous, qualitative change" (Weber, 1991, p.150). Each paradigm is characterized by a particular focus on certain aspects of development and a lack of attention to others. Thus, no one theory is sufficient to capture the complexity of human development.

Is there a general and universal path which all human development follows? A few psychologists say "no". Wells and Stryker (1988) understand human development as an "evolution of selves through the life course [that] is characterized by variability and fluidity" (p.207). In their view, there is no generalized life course through which we as individuals develop. Rather, they suggest, generalized theories are idealized summaries of the numerous and diverse patterns out of which we construct our lives (p.208). On the other side of this question are those psychologists who say "yes". Among them are Piaget (1967), Erikson (1963), and Kegan (1982)who assert that changes in self-concept throughout the life span follow an unchanging, underlying order. Normal development occurs when these changes are successfully negotiated. Delayed or retarded development may stem from certain critical experiences or events.

The choice of theories which follows is selective. Some (Freud, Erikson) are given brief mention for their contribution to our understanding of the potential impact of childhood trauma on human development. Some (Erikson, Piaget, Kegan), while making their own contribution to our understanding of human development, also provide the foundation for later theories (Fowler, Kohlberg, Genia) which acknowledge a spiritual dimension to human life and which, therefore, do not eschew words such as value, faith, religion or spiritual. Greater emphasis is given to these latter theories that do not see spirituality, faith or religion as extraneous to human life or as static entities acquired only in adult life. Rather, they describe faith, religion or spirituality as developmental in nature - as processes that are integral to holistic human development and which move the human person toward wholeness or integration.

Freud's View: Psychosexual Development

Freud viewed the personality as consisting of three structures: the id, the ego and the superego. The id, present at birth, contains all instincts which serve as the source for human psychic energy. In order to reduce tension, the id seeks immediate gratification of all instinctual drives through unrealistic or unacceptable means. At about six months of

age, the ego emerges. It seeks to satisfy the instinctual id urges in ways that are socially acceptable. The superego, which develops between ages four and six, represents the internalization of society's standards and moral values. If the ego fails in its function as mediator between the divergent demands of the id, the superego and reality, conflicts ensue resulting in psychic distress or anxiety.

For Freud (1905), development is an interaction between forces within and outside the human person. Physiological and psychological factors in early childhood affect the structure and function of the adult personality by providing stimuli for the individual's growth. Normal development occurs when the personality successfully passes through a series of five well-defined psychosexual stages until it reaches maturity. Each pscyhosexual stage entails some anxiety and frustration as the individual learns to resolve the conflict between instinct and social mores. At any stage, failure to resolve the conflict or, at the other extreme, excessive gratification, can result in fixation at that stage. When a traumatic experience occurs, either fixation or regression to an earlier stage of growth occurs creating a blockage to further normal growth.

A Psychosocial Developmental View: Erikson

Erikson (1964; 1968) modified and extended Freud's ideas by casting his own theory in a psychosocial form which sees the social world, particularly the need for social approval and belonging, as more influential to development than the need to control instinctual urges. Erikson assumes that human beings are basically rational and sees their behaviour mostly in terms of ego functioning. He also views development as a life span process which occurs in eight stages: trust versus mistrust; autonomy versus shame and doubt; initiative versus guilt; industry versus inferiority; identity versus role-confusion; intimacy versus isolation; generativity versus stagnation; and integrity versus despair. In each of the stages, there is a crisis and a corresponding maturational task that involves the individual in a choice or decision about her relationship with the social world. Depending on experiences, a person acquires either a positive social attitude or a negative one. There must be successful negotiation of one stage before transition to the next stage can occur. Successful negotiation of developmental issues brings "progress" and "integration"; failure results in "regression" and "retardation". Traumatic experiences at any stage can prevent further growth from occurring (Erikson, 1963).

Piaget: Cognitive Development

In developing his theory of cognitive development, Jean Piaget (1952) adopted a position he called "constructivism". Constructivism posits that, through interactions with the environment, human beings actively construct their knowledge. For Piaget, intelligence is the result of adaptation to one's environment. Adaptation is the preservation of equilibrium, that is, balance between oneself and the environment. Adaptation involves two complementary processes: assimilation and accommodation. The incorporation of new knowledge into existing cognitive structures or schemes is known as assimilation

(selectivity). Accommodation (flexibility) occurs when existing schemes are modified to include new knowledge and the acquisition of new responses. Both processes are necessary for cognitive growth. New information must be integrated into existing knowledge and existing knowledge must be expanded to encompass new and different information.

Cognitive development is ignited by a drive toward cognitive equilibrium. Conflict (disequilibrium) occurs when the store of schemas (summaries of current knowledge about a particular concept) is at odds with reality. Development results when the conflict is resolved through assimilation and accommodation.

The four stages proposed by Piaget follow a predetermined sequence that is related to biological maturation: sensorimotor - birth to two years; pre-operational thought - two to seven years; concrete operational -seven to eleven years; and formal operational - eleven years plus. Progress through these stages is reflected not only in cognitive growth but also in social, emotional and language development.

Underlying the theory is the assumption that each stage or level is discrete and complete. It is assumed that a person in stage two has fully realized stage one and so on. It has been generally confirmed that Piaget's sequence of changes is reliable. The stages, however, are not necessarily separate or distinct. There is also evidence that the age at which different individuals arrive at each stage varies and that features of several stages may be seen at a given point in development. Further, the process of development may be accelerated, stalled or arrested depending on training and life experiences (Lempers, Favell and Favell, 1977; Gelman, 1982; Helminiak, 1987, Weber, 1991). Only about half of the adult population reaches the stage of formal operations and, when adults do use formal operational thought, it is often confined to areas in which they have experience or expertise (Weber, 1991).

Moral Development: Kohlberg

Piaget proposed two stages of moral development which he called moral realism and moral relativism. He saw these two stages as maturationally tied to concrete operational and formal operational thinking. While it was an important first effort to describe the development of moral reasoning, later research showed it was also inadequate. The two stage model could not capture the variety of judgements seen in human beings throughout the life span.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) concluded that moral judgements did not show the age-related consistency Piaget had predicted. He demonstrated this by asking individuals to judge hypothetical moral dilemmas and then explain reasons for their judgements. Some individuals in each age group were able to reason in ways that could support either of two courses of action presented to them.

Kohlberg saw moral reasoning occurring in universal and invariant stages. These stages, he believed, are tied to both cognitive development and social experiences. In Kohlberg's scheme, moral development occurs at three levels (preconventional, conventional and post conventional moral judgement or reasoning) that each contain two

stages (Preconventional: Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation; Stage 2: Naive hedonistic and instrumental orientation; Conventional: Stage 3: Good boy/girl orientation; Stage 4: Law and authority orientation; Post-conventional: Stage 5: Social contract orientation; Stage 6: Universal ethical principle orientation). For most of his life, Kohlberg claimed his stage six as the ultimate stage of moral development. Kohlberg seemed convinced that the solution to moral dilemmas must finally be a closed and permanent solution, rationally determined and universal. Later, however, he broadened his thinking. What is more useful, in the context of this study, is Kohlberg's later addition to his theory which became his seventh stage.

Stage seven (Kohlberg and Power, 1981), allows for more open, individualistic and personal experience and seeks to make sense of experience. Stage seven asks questions about ultimate meaning and poses the question "why be moral at all?". The previous six stages, with their emphasis on rationality, fail to address such questions because, as Kohlberg noted, life is not rational. So, in his stage seven, Kohlberg breaks with his previous rational approach by going beyond it to a deeper personal level and addressing the transcendent dimension. This transcendent dimension which centres on the ultimate meaning of life - of suffering, pain, death, injustice, separation, love - is akin to what I have termed spirituality.

Ego Development: Kegan

Kegan suggests that there are six different levels of subject-object relations throughout the lifespan. By subject-object relations, Kegan means one's relationship to the holding environment or psychosocial setting at each stage that sustains the construction of the self. In Kegan's (1982) view, no one is just an individual. Rather, each person

> is an "individual" and "embeddual". There is never just you; and at this moment your own buoyancy or lack of it, your own sense of wholeness or lack of it, is in large part a function of how your own current embeddedness culture is holding you (p. 116).

Development necessitates passage through the six stages in which the individual seeks balance between being distinct and being embedded in a "holding culture". The stages describe the ways in which each person currently makes meaning of her experiences. They are "evolutionary truces" which provide a temporary solution to the lifelong pull all human beings experience toward distinctiveness and inclusion (Kegan, p.108). This tension is resolved in a kind of dance which slightly favours autonomy at one stage; at another, inclusion. Transitional moments, which are inevitable, occur when one's ways of making meaning no longer "fit" and meaning structures begin to totter. At such moments, finding oneself caught between "old" and "new" selves, the individual is left open to a breakdown in meaning which may precipitate a crisis in the very construction of self.

Over and over, throughout their lives, human beings bring themselves out of one holding environment to another. Letting go of the present holding environment allows them to move into a broader one where personal expansion can occur. The self grows as it

emerges from various holding environments or embedded cultures (e.g., our primary caretaker in infancy; authority figures and peers in school and others in love relationships) by disidentifying from them through a change in self-consciousness. Always, the preferred order of development is toward new forms of openness and inclusion.

Kegan (1982) believes that his model with its dual recognition of the human need for autonomy and inclusion presents a

> corrective to *all* present developmental frameworks which univocally define growth in terms of differentiation, separation, increasing autonomy, and lose sight of the fact that adaptation is equally about integration, attachment, inclusion (p. 106).

This model also concurs with feminist perspectives such as those of Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, Nancy Chodorow, Mary Belenky and others who stress that integration as well as differentiation is important to human growth and development.

Faith Development

Fowler's theory of faith development is one of various proposed stage models of religious/faith development. These models describe the general structural changes or process that individuals undergo in their feeling, thinking and experiencing as they grow to mature faith. This process is a moving outward from the highly egocentric faith of childhood to an autonomous and integrated adult faith (Genia, 1990, p.86). For Fowler, faith is a lifelong, meaning-making process which, though it can be religious, is not limited to a traditional religious context. As such, Fowler's definition of faith may be closer to what this study has termed spirituality rather than religion.

In his theory of faith development, Fowler (1981) was influenced by the work of Erikson, Piaget and Kohlberg and postulated six stages of faith development that roughly correspond to and are logically consistent with their models of psychosocial, cognitive and moral development. Faith development is thus seen to be part of the development of the whole person.

Transition from one stage to the next can be painful and protracted. Crisis is the necessary catalyst that encourages growth from one stage to the next. Each stage is a more developed and matured expression of faith than the preceding one and conveys a fuller, more adequate discernment into life, allowing for more trustworthy and loving decisions. The earlier stages of faith development are marked by memorization, imitation, striving to please others and dependence on clear rules and teachings. The later stages are characterized by increased honest reflection, an ability to explore disparate perspectives, a willingness to take responsibility for one's life and decisions, greater self-awareness and commitment to others. Growth from one stage to the next is not automatic and fixation at one stage or another is possible.

Paralleling Erikson's description of the first year of life, Fowler's first stage (from infancy to about eighteen months) is actually a pre-stage known as Undifferentiated Faith. The basic conflict to be settled is between trust and mistrust and is enacted primarily in the

mutuality of relationship between the child and significant caregivers, especially parents. If the conflict is successfully negotiated, the child learns trust, hope, love and autonomy which are the foundation of faith.

Movement from Undifferentiated Faith to Stage One - Intuitive-projective faith - occurs from about age three to age seven. Faith at this stage is highly imaginative. Out of her imagination, the young child builds a store of both positive and negative images and feelings. Fact and fantasy are not differentiated and symbols are taken literally. Affectivity dominates the child's life. Faith is formed by imitation of moods, attitudes, example and actions of the visible human faith of significant others, especially parents. The locus of authority is in the parents.

The Mythic-literal stage (ages seven to twelve) is an affiliative stage. The child comes to belong more self-consciously to her "faith community" and begins to take on and own the stories, beliefs and practices that symbolize belonging to the group. The stories and myths of the community are taken literally. Life is as it appears to be. The developing ability to think logically (concrete operations) allows the child to differentiate between the natural and supernatural. The authority of significant others dominates over that of peers. There is an increase in empathic ability but usually only for those of one's own community.

New cognitive abilities (formal operations) signal adolescence and the stage of faith Fowler calls Synthetic-conventional faith (age twelve to early adulthood). Stage three faith is one that interprets, relates to and makes meaning out of life according to the directions and criteria of what "they say"; the perspective is third person. As yet, the person is generally without sufficient grasp of her own identity to make autonomous judgements from an independent perspective. Faith is still not a personally owned faith but is a faith based on what others say and do. There is an increased awareness of the faith perspectives of others but with a tendency toward prejudice or assimilation. While there is an increase of trust in one's own judgement, it is used only to choose between authorities (parents. school, peers, organizations). There may be a deference to whatever is perceived as the highest authority (hierarchicalizing) or by making meaning and interpreting the world differently depending on the authority (group) one is with at the time (compartmentalizing). Institutional authority is often accepted as the final word on spiritual or religious matters. The synthesis achieved is not a personal autonomous synthesis.

The transition from stage three to stage four (about age eighteen) is crucial and difficult. Many people never make it. Failure to make the transition from stage three to stage four will halt the adult task of achieving spiritual maturity (Helminiak, 1987). When the conventional synthesis of stage three begins to collapse, a recognition of the lack of congruence between the self and the various expectations of different groups occurs, that is, the person can no longer tolerate herself being different when she is with different groups or she realizes that she cannot give her meaning making over to even the highest authority.

In this stage, Individuating-reflexive faith, a more self chosen faith emerges and there is far more personal autonomy than in stage three. Values, life style and meaning become more personally chosen and a greater congruency between the private and public self

develops. There is a newfound awareness of the paradoxes and polarities of life. Fowler lists some of these as: individual versus community; particular versus universal; relative versus absolute; self fulfillment versus service to others. The person in stage four attempts to handle these tensions and to maintain equilibrium. However, there is a tendency to collapse the tension in favour of one over the other. Thus the stage four person may tend to take an "either-or"/"all-or-nothing" approach. It is also possible at this stage to join a community that offers ready made answers to life's paradoxes. But even this is a more self-chosen commitment.

Stage five, Conjunctive faith, may be realized if the mid-life adult can move beyond the former stages of faith. Here, the paradoxes and polarities of life are embraced and held in fruitful tension with one another. If stage three is dependent, stage four independent, then stage five is interdependent. One is capable of depending on others without losing one's own independence. There is empathy and active concern for the whole human family. There is a respect for and openness to the truth in other's positions without relinquishing one's own. Particulars are valued for the possibility of the universal that they hold. Past patterns of commitment and ways of making meaning may be reappropriated. This is a reclamation, however, not a regression - it is a drawing strength from tradition and community even while recognizing their limitations.

Universalizing faith, the final stage in Fowler's theory, may have its beginnings in mid-life. It is the preeminent stage of integration. Those who reach this stage are those who exhibit rare qualities of "transcendent moral and religious actuality", "devotion to universalizing compassion" "enlarged visions of universal community" "leadership initiatives, often involving strategies for nonviolent suffering and ultimate respect for being" and who "[make] real and tangible...the imperatives of absolute love and justice" (Fowler, 1981, p.200). As examples of those who have attained such faith, Fowler (p. 201) lists Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Dag Hammarskjold, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton. What these people have in common is their ability to work in the service of and to share with humankind the unity and meaning they have found at the inner core of being without consideration of the cost to themselves.

Religious Development

Vicky Genia (1990) has developed a theory of what she terms "religious development". Her definition of religion, implied rather than stated, is one that echoes William James who stated: "religion...shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of [individuals] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1958, p.42). In his consideration of religion, James' focus was on "personal religion, pure and simple" (p.41), on "direct personal communion with the divine" (p.42) and not on institutional religion. In short, it falls into the realm of what this study has called spirituality. Notwithstanding Genia's use of the phrase "religious development" for her model, I have taken her theory to be one of spiritual development.

Genia, borrowing from James, distinguishes between a mature, healthy form of spirituality and a psychologically unhealthy spiritual outlook. She uses Allport's terminology to refine the distinction. Healthy spiritual functioning stems from an intrinsic motivation wherein "one's faith is lived as an end in itself, functioning as a foundation for one's choices and giving meaning to life's experiences" (1990, p.86). The extrinsically motivated person, on the other hand, uses spirituality in a pragmatic, serviceable way either to justify a particular way of living or to defend against reality (1990, p.85).

Genia also acknowledges and builds upon the aformentioned developmental theorists' contributions to understanding faith development. The unique contribution she ascribes to her own theory is that it broadens the understanding of religious functioning by including psychodynamic and object-relations perspectives thus illuminating more fully the psychological factors that contribute to spiritual underdevelopment.. In Genia's words, her model is designed to "serve as a descriptive guideline for assessing [a person's] general level of psychospiritual functioning" (p.86) and "to illuminate the intrapsychic dynamics" (p. 85) underlying unhealthy spiritual functioning in adults.

Egocentric Faith

Egocentricity is characteristic of stage one, Egocentric faith. An adult who functions at this level is likely to exhibit self-centredness and egotism in all areas of her life. Immature spiritual expression and imagery are but one expression of a general underdevelopment of the personality. The egocentric nature of the adult's moral behaviour is revealed in the way she considers immediate consequences, negative or positive, for herself and takes little or no account of other's needs (Kohlberg's stage one). In psychosocial terms, the egocentric adult has not acquired the basic trust which Erikson deemed important to the establishment of a healthy self-concept and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Object relations theory provides an expanded understanding of this first stage of spiritual development. If a child fails to develop a strong sense of security during the separation-individuation stage, she will not form stable internal images of others. Instead, she will "split" others into "all good" or "all bad" depending on their ability to gratify her immediate emotional and psychological needs. Others' needs and feelings are neither recognized nor heeded. So, too, in the spiritual arena. The adult functioning at a stage one level of spiritual maturity will "use" the divine to satisfy her needs according to the accompanying affect. Thus, the divine, which is seen as an extension of self, may be viewed as either "all good" or "all bad" depending on the individual's circumstances. Alternatively, a splitting of "the all-good self-object into a benevolent God figure and the all-bad self-object into a Satanic image" (Genia, 1990, p.88) may occur. Anthropomorphic images of the divine reflect the lack of firm ego boundaries between self and other which characterize early failures in ego development. Adults whose spiritual outlook is highly egocentric provide "strong evidence for the existence of severe characterological disturbances resulting from early developmental failures" (Genia, 1990, p.88).

Dogmatic Faith

Stage two of Genia's developmental model is called Dogmatic faith. The operative word at this stage is dogmatic. In all areas of development, the stage two person is governed by rules and gives obedience to the rules without consideration of the situational context. Law-and-order is the mentality that governs moral behaviour. Rules need to be fixed, clearly defined and fairly applied. There is an awareness of others' needs and rights as well as one's own in the application of the rules which suggests that persons at this stage have formed stable internal object relations and a basic sense of trust.

Psychodynamically, the stage two person, troubled by oedipal difficulties and lacking self-esteem and an internal sense of worth, fears rejection and loss of love. Psychosocial growth is hampered by an oppressive superego which fosters profound, chronic guilt and repression.

The spiritually dogmatic person builds and adheres to a strong, authoritarian belief system. Rigidity and perfectionism are used to maintain internal controls and to cope with excessive guilt and fear of rejection. Bargaining characterizes the relationship of the individual to the divine. Promises of greater obedience are made in exchange for personal favours or guarantees of divine love. Guilt over wrongdoings may actually be fear of one's own conscience projected onto a concrete, punitive God figure and transformed into fear of losing God's love. Scrupulosity stems from a severe superego and represents a strong defense against sexual and aggressive impulses. Reconciliation with God is achieved through admission of wrongdoing which renews self-esteem.

Persons whose spiritual development remains at the dogmatic level have difficulty accepting themselves and others. The locus for authority in their lives resides outside themselves and is obeyed unquestioningly. Obedience to external authority, literally interpreted and obeyed absolutely, as well as conformity to one's own group provide security. The defensive nature of dogmatic faith is revealed in an intolerance of views that differ from one's own and may extend to fanatical efforts to convert others to them. The dogmatic individual's integrity is threatened when doubts concerning her own beliefs are aroused by exposure to those of others. Thus, attempts to convert others help confirm one's own beliefs, bolster self-esteem and protect against doubt.

Transitional Faith

As Erikson, Kohlberg, and others have shown, many developmental changes are considered normal during the adolescent period. Significant among them are the capacity for mutuality in relationships and the ability to move beyond one's own position to consider the views of others with an open mind (Fowler, 1981). With these changes also come doubt and uncertainty as one's own views are tried in the fire of mutual exchange and scrutiny (Erikson, 1968). This period of searching, during which an individual learns to move toward a more healthy intrinsic spiritual commitment, peaks during adolescence but may occur much later (Genia, 1991). For some individuals, changes in spiritual outlook are an accompaniment to changes in other aspects of the personality. In all cases

where the transition occurs, movement toward a more intrinsic, differentiated and personally integrated spirituality is a painful process. Confusion and emotional turmoil arise from the loss of one's previously held certainty. Existing beliefs and values are subjected to critical examination ushered in by rebellion against external authority and in an effort to reframe one's spiritual identity. Many avenues of exploration may be chosen including "denominational or affiliation switching, investigation of nontraditional sects or cults, and church hopping" (Genia, 1990, p.91). If all goes well this transitional movement will culminate in a self-chosen faith.

Reconstructed Internalized Faith

At this stage, the individual's faith provides meaning in life and a sense of purpose. For religiously affiliated individuals, adherence to doctrine and scripture may be important. If so, there is an appreciation of their complexity which rejects literal and concrete interpretations. The stage four person has internalized the standards of her faith and has made them the interior ground for her life's choices. The values and standards of a person in this stage are not separate from or incidental to the pivotal concerns of her life but are inclusive of them and consistently applied.

Morality, for those operating from within a reconstructed faith, is viewed as a social contract (Kohlberg Stage 5) in which individuals derive benefits from compliance with rules as long as they do not contravene the blueprint of one's own spiritual code.

The person at stage four has the cognitive capacity to differentiate shades of variance. The thinking style of the person nevertheless tends to be dichotomous with an adherence to absolutes. Individuals at stage four have acquired neither a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty nor an appreciation of the paradoxical nature and multidimensionality of mature spirituality. While respecting the right of others to a self-chosen spiritual path different from her own, the person at this stage is unlikely to include and synthesize other's views to expand her own. Having found joy in the path chosen, an individual may try to convert others to it. However, the individual whose development has reached this stage will not refuse to help anyone who is in need, regardless of the other's ideological or theological stance.

The person who is guided by an internal reconstructed faith is guided by interior appraisal of culpability in particular situations. Thus, when falling short of the mark, she will feel a healthy sorrow rather than excessive guilt and self-blame and will commit herself to corrective action.

Genia, drawing on research by Donahue (1985), concludes that persons guided by a spirituality that is internalized "overall, tend to be more psychologically and emotionally healthy than those in earlier stages of religious development" (1990, p. 92).

Transcendent Faith

The fifth and final stage in Genia's model provides a summary of the elements considered essential to spiritual maturity. Genia notes that "Although there is considerable

overlap between this stage and stage four, transcendent faith is more flexibly guided by a universal principled morality and consists of more permeable psychospiritual boundaries" (1990, p. 92-93).

The ten criteria for spiritual maturity provided by Genia represent a synthesis of the literature on this subject. Several of them overlap with Ellis' multidimensional view of spirituality which was presented earlier. Genia's first criterion states that the spiritual person is in transcendent relationship with something greater than herself (Genia, 1990, p. 93 and 1991, p. 338). The *quality* of the relationship between the individual and her idea of the transcendent is central to spiritual maturity. Genia says the relationship should be "divested of egocentric and utilitarian motives as much as is humanly possible" (1990, p. 93).

Secondly, mature spirituality is reflected in a personal commitment to a style of living, including moral behaviour, which is consistent with the individual's spiritual values (Genia, 1991, p. 338). Mature spirituality goes beyond assent to a creed or passive awareness of the divine. Values and beliefs, internalized and integrated with one's life experience and conscience, are the foundation for moral decisions and guidelines for actions in all spheres of life (Genia, 1990, p. 93).

Third among Genia's (1990, 1991) criteria is the ability to make a commitment in the absence of absolute certainty (p. 93 and p. 339). Here she echoes Allport's (1950) view that faith is strengthened by doubt. The spiritually mature individual is comfortable with this paradox which allows her to live in a way consistent with her present level of knowledge and truth while seeking to discover higher levels.

An openness to spiritually diverse viewpoints is Genia's (1991) fourth criterion (p. 339). Here, she echoes Fromm (1950) who observed that no one can presume that her image of God is the "right" one or that one's knowledge of God allows for condemnation of others. The spiritually mature person is not merely tolerant of diverse spiritual perspectives and ideological systems but views them as vehicles for expanding the boundaries of her own understanding of spiritual truth (Genia, 1990, p. 94).

The fifth criterion is that mature faith is free of egocentricity, magical thinking and anthropomorphic concepts of God (Genia, 1991, p. 339). The person with a less developed spirituality attempts to place "God into their own socio-psychological boundaries" (Genia, 1990, p.94) so as to maintain a positive sense of self and a sense of security in a world perceived as threatening. The spiritually mature individual looks for ways to go beyond her own psychosocial boundaries toward greater levels of consciousness and being.

The sixth criterion states that a mature spiritual outlook includes both emotional and rational components (Genia, 1991, p. 339). The spiritually mature person does not avoid wrestling with such existential problems as mortality, misfortune, suffering, and the problem of good and evil. A mature faith must feed the intellect by providing feasible but tentative solutions compatible with rational thought to these problems. At the same time, mature faith must also feed the emotions by providing a feeling of personal connection and relationship to the transcendent and a dynamic quality to the individual's world view.

The spiritually mature individual (criterion seven) expresses social interest and humanitarian concern (Genia, 1991, p.339). Here, drawing from Fromm (1950), Genia notes that the spiritual quest to achieve the highest human potential is not achieved in isolation or for self alone. There is also a responsibility on all humankind to enhance the social order "through productive love, reason and cooperative unity" (Genia, 1990, p.95). Mature spirituality, expressed through "passionate commitment and effective action" (p. 95), bears fruit for the individual and for others.

Mature spirituality is life enhancing and growth producing (Genia, 1991, p.339; criterion 8). A mature spiritual quest encourages the "natural unfolding of the self" (Genia, 1990, p.95). Mature spirituality does not disavow, constrain or suppress parts of the self. Rather it is an integrating force which unites them and provides healthy channels for the expression of human needs and wants.

A healthy spirituality encourages commitment to life and a hopeful view of human nature and the world. It accepts personal responsibility without condemning self or others to excessive guilt. Forgiveness takes precedence over guilt.

The means by which the personality is integrated and connected to the larger world is meaning. For the spiritually mature, meaning must also have an ultimate dimension which includes the individual while also moving beyond her (criterion 9). Healthy spirituality provides direction for actions and decisions in life while also infusing the individual with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Finally, Genia (1991; criterion 10) states that mature faith is not dependent on a specific dogma, set of practices or formal religious structure (p.339) nor does it exclude such possibilities. Doctrine, when central to an individual's spiritual commitment, serves as the ground and not the core of faith. The spiritually integrated individual may be committed to a particular religion. Whether committed to a particular religion or not, the commitment of the spiritually mature, allows them to remain open to diverse perspectives that call them to "complement, expand or revise their spiritual understanding" (Genia, 1990, p.96).

The foregoing discussion, and Genia's model, in particular, shows that human development is a very complex process which, under favourable conditions, leads to ever higher levels of consciousness and to wholeness of person. The model proposed by Genia is not the last word on spiritual development, to be sure. What it does offer, however, is a starting point for understanding the possible psychological dynamics involved in the spiritual functioning of adults. As Genia herself points out, other stages - or more precisely, other points on the continuum of spiritual development - may yet be found. Also, other areas of psychology, such as social psychology, may provide enrichment of our understanding of spiritual development. Whatever theory is used to describe spiritual development, it is clear that certain traumatic events in childhood may thwart, delay or arrest such development. One such childhood trauma, sexual abuse, has been shown to have potentially negative effects in virtually all areas of a person's life. It is to this topic that we now turn our attention.

Sexual Abuse

Exact incidence rates for childhood sexual abuse are unknown and reported rates vary according to how childhood sexual abuse is defined. In Canada, one of the most comprehensive investigations into the problem of childhood sexual abuse was the 1984 Badgley Commission which estimated that one in two females are victims of one or more unwanted sexual acts before the age of 18. Badgley's definition was a broad one and included activities that range from exposure to intercourse.

The term sexual abuse, as used in this study, refers to "any sexual activity or experience imposed on a child which results in emotional, physical or sexual trauma" (Russell, 1986, p.5). It is a breach of trust by someone from whom the female child should rightly expect warmth or protection and sexual distance. This definition recognizes the fact that the majority of offenders are known to the victim and, indeed, are often close relatives (Bagley and King, 1990; Dolan, 1992; Russell, 1986).

Secrecy and Silence

Secrecy and silence merit comment because, among survivors of sexual abuse, they are so common as to be normative. Many adults sexually abused as children report that they did not tell about their abuse for years after its occurrence. Consequently, they spent much of their lives carrying their secret and its attendant shame in silence. As children, many felt unable to give voice to their experience. Maintaining silence about the abuse is perhaps one of the most important issues in what happened to their development as children. The "vehicle of sexual abuse" was used "to carry them through childhood development" and made "deviancy the foundation of [that] development" (Hindman, 1989, p.87). Developmental tasks, essential to healthy human growth, are interrupted or distorted by sexual abuse. In some individuals, regression to a developmental stage just prior to the abusive experience may occur (Grove, 1989) leaving the adult "stuck" in her development. Or the abused child may skip over the developmental sequence where the abuse occurred thus reaching a fragile and false adulthood (Cheston, 1992)

Effects of sexual abuse

While there is no firm agreement on either the short or long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse, there is a large body of literature on the subject. Similarly, there is no one definition of what constitutes sexual abuse, though many definitions overlap. Despite these difficulties, there does seem to be general agreement that the experience of sexual abuse is never a benign one and many of the short and long-term effects of sexual abuse cited in the clinical literature are confirmed by empirical studies.

Not all survivors will have the full range of possible effects or experience them to the same degree nor is it entirely clear which constellation of factors contributes to specific effects. The research findings (Alexander, 1992; Bagley and King, 1990; Brown and Finklehor, 1986; Cole and Putnam, 1992; Finklehor, 1979; Jehu and Gazan, 1983;

Lebatbera, Martin and Dozier, 1980; Porter, Blick and Sgroi, 1982 and others) show that the short-term effects of child sexual abuse may include withdrawal, phobias, mistrust, sexual acting out, school difficulties, sleep disturbances, guilt, depression, fear and hostility.

While serious long-term effects are not inevitable, the risk for mental health impairment is significant with over six percent of the female population being affected (Finklehor and Brown, 1986). The studies of Alexander, 1992; Bagley and Ramsey, 1985; Bagley and Young, 1988; Bagley and King, 1990; Briere and Runtz, 1985; Cole and Putnam, 1992; Russell, 1986 and many others have reached similar conclusions. Their findings show that, generally, long-term effects may be seen to affect some abused individuals in four broad areas.

Emotional reactions and self-perception

Depression; self-destructive behaviour (including self-mutilation), suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts; anxiety/tension and a predominantly negative self-image fall into this category (Bagley and Ramsey, 1985; Bagley and Young, 1988; Bagley and King, 1990; Blick and Porter, 1982). Having learned as children to deny or repress their feelings in order to cope with their abuse, many survivors have difficulty in identifying and expressing their feelings as adults (Bagley and King, 1990; Blick and Porter, 1982; Dolan, 1992; Josephson and Fong-Beyette, 1987). Particularly difficult for many survivors is learning to express anger at their abusers. Survivors often fear that releasing their anger will either overwhelm them or cause harm to others (Bagley and King, 1990; Dolan, 1992; Blick and Porter, 1982; Leehan and Wilson, 1985).

Feelings of profound shame and unworthiness are frequently felt. In the child's attempt to control the reality that she is being abused by a trusted adult, the child may deny the adult's culpability and blame herself for the abuse (Bates and Brodsky, 1989, Briere, 1992; Dolan, 1991). Sargent (1989) suggests that it is easier for the child to believe that she is bad than to believe that the trusted adult is uncaring and unmindful of her needs and well-being. Similarly, believing that she is bad is easier for the child than to come to terms with the fact that other trusted adults cannot or will not protect her. Often the abuser tells the child that some other significant adult (her mother, for example) will be angry if the abuse is discovered. The child may falsely conclude that she is doing something wrong. Thus she begins to integrate into her reality what she understands about right and wrong.

Survivors often minimize the significance of, rationalize or deny the effects of the abuse to themselves (Hindman, 1989). One coping strategy results in survivors being cut off from themselves in a process known as dissociation. Often survivors report that they watched themselves being abused without feeling anything or that they lost touch with their bodies (Dolan, 1992; Jones, 1986; McCann et al, 1988). Or they may suffer from memory impairment reflected by amnesia about the events that occurred. Amnesia and dissociation "make the victim vulnerable to memory *zaps* throughout the rest of their lives giving them no cognitive awareness for many of their affective responses to the memories"

(Hindman, 1989, p.84). Some (e.g., Brickman, 1984, Jones, 1986; Hindman, 1989, Meisleman, 1990; Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1989) believe that, in more extreme forms, dissociation, which begins as a protective device, may give rise to the development of separate or "multiple" personalities. However, controversy has arisen over the connection between multiple personality disorder (MPD) and childhood sexual abuse (Loftus, 1994). Ganaway (1991) and McHugh (1993) have cautioned against what they consider the over-diagnosis of multiple personality disorder. McHugh (1993) recommended:

> Close the dissociation services and disperse the patients to general psychiatric units. Ignore the alters. Stop talking to them [i.e., the alter personalities], taking notes on them, and discussing them in staff conferences. Pay attention to the real present problems and conflicts rather than fantasy. If these simple, familiar rules are followed, multiple personalities will soon wither away and psychotherapy can begin (p. 6).

The issue of multiple personality disorder may have been at least partially resolved with the introduction of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (DSM-IV). In the DSM-IV, the label "multiple personality disorder" or MPD has been replaced by "dissociative identity disorder" or DID. Loftus (1994), citing Dr. David Spiegel of the American Psychiatric Association, noted that DID is used because patients who suffer from what has been called MPD "really have *less* than one personality rather than *more* than one personality" (p. 85, italics added).

Interpersonal relationships

Fear and hostility toward and a sense of betrayal by others is reported by victims. Expectations of others may be limited by generalizations about the abusive experience. The survivor may conclude that no one is to be trusted and that she can rely only upon herself (Sargent, 1989; Dolan, 1992). At the same time, the child who is a survivor of sexual abuse has a tremendous need for a caring parent figure (Pope and Bouhoutsos, 1986) and displays a "desperate and often ineffective search for nurturing" (Bagley and King, 1990). In cases where the abuser is her father or other close relative, the woman sexually abused as a child may experience continuing problems with her own parents as well as difficulty in parenting and responding to her own children (Joy, 1987; Bagley and King, 1990). Additionally, later decisions about marriage and children can be profoundly affected by inhibitions about tenderness that result from sexual abuse (Goodwin, McCarthy and DiVasto, 1981 cited in Bagley and King, 1990). Revictimization through rape as well as spousal abuse (Bagley and King, 1990, Briere, 1992) and even by abusive therapists (Armsworth, 1990, Kluft, 1989) is also seen to occur significantly more often in women sexually abused as children than among those who have not had such experience (between 40 and 60% versus 18%) (Bagley and Ramsey, 1986; Bagley and King, 1990; Russell, 1986).

Sexuality

Various types of sexual dysfunction arising from childhood sexual abuse were noted. Among them were decreased sex drive, sexual guilt, sexual anxiety, confusion about sexual orientation, (Bagley and King, 1990; Mrazek and Mrazek, 1981; Meiselman, 1978), an inability to enjoy sexual activity and repeated unwanted pregnancies (deYoung, 1982b). Some survivors fear sexual arousal because it has associations with the loss of control they experienced during their childhood abuse or now, as adults, they must repeat behaviour "for the purpose of pleasure, which was once a form of terror" (Hindman, 1989, p. 79). Additionally, some survivors exhibit the extremes of avoidance of/abstinence from all sexual behaviour or "promiscuity" (Bagley and King, 1990; Russell, 1986).

Social Functioning

Alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution occur with significantly greater frequency among sexual abuse victims (Bagley and King, 1990; Blick and Porter, 1982; Josephson and Fong-Beyette, 1987; Joy, 1987; Shapiro, 1987). It is thought that these behaviours often result from internalized anger that gives rise to self-hatred (Blick and Porter, 1982; Josephson and Fong-Beyette; 1987; Joy; 1987; Shapiro, 1987). As a result of the betrayal by "someone on whom they were vitally dependent" (Finklehor and Brown, 1985, p. 531), many adult survivors experience difficulty in maintaining adult relationships and establishing intimacy.

Spiritual Effects of Sexual Abuse

The above wide ranging effects of childhood sexual abuse are given here to provide readers with an overview as well as to allow readers to be mindful of them in ensuing discussions. Among these general effects, three have been specifically cited in the literature as also being spiritual effects.

Abandonment

Survivors, as children, often experienced a lack of support or involvement by a significant adult which is felt as abandonment. Sexually abused children may turn to God, praying for a way out of the abuse. When no solution or help is forthcoming, they may conclude that God is deaf to their need; that God, too, has abandoned them (Fortune, 1983; Fortune and Hertze, 1991).

Upon revealing their abuse, survivors are often disbelieved or blamed for the abuse by those closest to them (Bagley and King, 1990; Briere, 1992; Dolan, 1992; Hindman, 1989). Others have experienced rejection or judgmental attitudes from clergy or church members which may alienate them from their religious community or deepen their shame (Servaty, 1991). They literally experience being abandoned. In their despair, survivors may believe that God, too, has turned away from them or they may doubt God's existence.

The survivor's understanding of suffering is also important here. Some survivors have learned explicitly or implicitly that "good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people" (Fortune, 1983; Servaty, 1991). In the encounter with suffering that sexual abuse and its aftermath brings, the survivor may feel betrayed by God or she may conclude that her suffering is a punishment from God or a sign of God's disfavour (Fortune, 1983; Fortune and Hertze, 1991; Sargent, 1988; Servaty, 1991).

Guilt

The child victim, and later, the adult often feels "different", "marked" in some indelible way and deserving of being outcast from others (Bagley and King, 1990; Blick and Porter, 1982; Burgess, 1984). Some, as already noted, blame themselves for the abuse because it is less disruptive to their belief system than blaming the perpetrator. Self-blame and isolation leave the survivor vulnerable to teachings that centre on the God-sinner relationship. Hearing that Eve, and through her, all women have brought sin and suffering into the world can be taken as a personal condemnation by the survivor (Sargent, 1989). Through a lack of knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of sexual abuse, the survivor often mistakenly believes herself to be guilty of some sexual transgression rather than a victim of violence. She may also assume that she is guilty in God's eyes and believe that God, powerful and often punishing, is judging her (Fortune, 1983; Sargent, 1989).

Anger

Anger is a healthy response to victimization. Nevertheless, survivors often have difficulty expressing or even admitting anger. It may be denied or repressed for years. This inability to acknowledge anger is often complicated by a Christian attitude which condemns anger especially in women (Fortune, 1983; Noddings, 1989; Schneiders, 1983). Thus, survivors are caught in a dilemma. Anger , although an appropriate response to their abuse, often carries an accompanying guilt (Anderson and Hopkins, 1991; Fortune, 1983; Goldor-Lerner, 1992; Schneiders, 1982).

Internalized anger may be the source of such self-destructive behaviours as substance abuse, prostitution, suicide attempts and/or suicide. These behaviours, problematic in themselves for survivors, also contravene Christian values. For survivors caught in such behaviours, guilt is heaped upon guilt and is not easily overcome (Fortune, 1983; Sargent, 1989).

Religious Defection

Although it is not listed in either of the general areas above, "religious defection" may be considered an effect on the spirituality of at least some female survivors. For many people, a church community can provide communion, relationship and a support system. Defection from one's "religious upbringing" will generally also mean the loss of that community.

Russell (1986) notes that there is significant relationship between incest victimization and religious defection. In both Catholics and Protestants, Russell found that 56% of victims had rejected their respective religious upbringing. The "defection rate" for Catholics who had not been victims, however, was much lower than for Protestant non-victims (28% and 43% respectively). Russell's findings are confined to statistics. Explanations for these findings are issued as a challenge to other researchers. It is worthy of note that Russell's definition of incestuous abuse is a very broad one : "any kind of exploitive sexual contact or attempted contact that occurred between relatives, no matter how distant the relationship, before the victims turned eighteen years old" (p.41). It suggests a clear connection between any experience of childhood sexual abuse and "religious defection" but leaves one to wonder what the connection might be.

The observations of Fortune, Sargent, Schneiders and others previously noted suggest some possible answers to Russell's finding. As we have seen, survivors often feel isolated, abandoned, guilty and judged by themselves, others and God. Such feelings may leave some of them believing that they are too much at odds with their church teachings and practices; too "unworthy" of membership in the church community. Some may generalize from their experiences and conclude that all church-goers, like their abusers, preach behaviours that are at wide variance with their actual behaviours - are "hypocrites". Also at issue may be the survivor's loss of ability to trust and to make social contacts that would provide for a meaningful experience of community.

Degree of Impact of Abuse

The degree of impact which child sexual abuse has upon a survivor's life is related to the meaning which she ascribes to it (Sgroi and Bank, 1988). As noted earlier, one of the principal meaning-making systems available to human beings is religion. The kind of spirituality which a religion fosters is important to how one names oneself as well as the sacred.

Female survivors' experience of sexual abuse cannot be isolated from their wider experience. Much of women's experience has had negative effects on their spirituality. In particular, the reality of male dominance, whether accepted or rejected by women, has had negative impact on women's spiritual experience.

Poling (1991) has observed that images of God as father, king and ruler sanction the abuser's authority over the victim of sexual abuse. Also, such images make it difficult for the survivor (as a child or an adult) to find benevolent images for God from which she can seek comfort (Poling, 1991; Sargent, 1989).

Survivors abused by their own fathers may find the image of God as father unimaginable or repugnant. Sargent (1989) states:

> For some adults abused as children, a relationship with God as a personified being may be as frightening and potentially abusive as the relationship with their abusers had been in childhood and as any intimate human relationship might be in their present lives (p. 172).

This being so, maternal images of God may not necessarily be comforting either. For the survivor who felt abandoned or rejected by her mother during the abuse or after disclosure, "mother" may conjure up images of one who is uncaring, aloof or unresponsive. Images of a maternal God as nurturing and caring may be difficult to imagine or reconcile with the survivor's experience (Sargent, 1989).

Summary

The potential and actual effects of childhood sexual abuse are many and can affect every dimension of survivors' lives. Most of these effects have been thoroughly catalogued. The effects of childhood sexual abuse on the survivors' spirituality are acknowledged but information is scant and no rich description of how the childhood experience of sexual abuse enlivens or darkens survivors' spiritual experience could be found in any of the research literature.

In taking account of the spiritual, women's own experiences must be considered. Women need to examine the ways their lives are storied and to make choices about the ways they wish to story their futures (Heilbrun, 1990; Laird, 1989). Women's own stories as well as the ones they have been told are integral to women's spiritual understanding of themselves and their spiritual quest.

Spirituality, "the life principle that invades a person's entire being..." was presented as a complex, multidimensional reality which is part of the totality of the human person. Characteristics that describe mature spirituality were provided. As was shown, spiritual development parallels epigenetic theories of psychosocial, cognitive, moral and ego development. Genia expanded the existing models of spiritual or religious development by including and organizing insights from psychodynamic and object relations theories. In addition, she provided criteria for mature spiritual functioning. By implication, spiritual functioning is seen to be interdependent and generally congruent with other facets of human personality. Thus, attention to a person's spirituality offers important glimpses into her overall psychological functioning.

This study is a story within a story. It allows six women to speak to us in their own voices as well as through the voice of the researcher to open up a window of understanding into the question of the effects of childhood sexual abuse on their spiritual development and on the changes that occurred over time in their spiritual understanding. It is an expression of trust in "the perfection of the creation...that whatever [question] the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order can satisfy" (Emerson).

CHAPTER 3

RE-SEARCHING LIVED EXPERIENCE
A Way to Approach the Question

> Once some disciples of the Baal Shem Tov approached him and asked "Why do you answer all questions by telling a story? Why do you always tell stories?"...the Baal Shem Tov, after a loving, lingering pause responded: "Salvation lies in remembrance". (Jewish Folktales, Sadeh, p. 130).

Introduction

In chapter two the survivors' situation was briefly explored in order to open up the question of this study. The overall negative repercussions of childhood sexual abuse were summarized to show their relationship to the self-understanding of the adult female survivor. Those outcomes cited in the research as spiritual effects of childhood sexual abuse were also noted. The research to date, while shedding some light on the question posed here, offers a limited view of the way in which the female adult survivor 's experience of child sexual abuse (CSA) and her spirituality meet and how they shape one another.

The present chapter will describe the approach to human science research known as hermeneutic phenomenology. It will also provide a rationale for why this approach was chosen as the vehicle for exploring the main question of this study. This chapter will also outline the manner in which the author prepared herself for the study, how participants were chosen for the study and how the study's major themes, which will be presented in chapters four through seven, were realized.

Method of Inquiry

In deciding on an approach to the inquiry of this study, I wanted to ensure that the experience of the women would be primary. This meant it was important to find an approach that allowed them to tell their own stories in response to the question. As women, they had been influenced by the silencing of voice that has been the legacy of all women (Jack, 1991; Lerner, 1993; Williamson, 1993). As survivors of child sexual abuse, they had also experienced the silencing of voice that the childhood experience of sexual abuse creates (Bagley and King, 1990; Dolan, 1990; Hindman, 1989). As I understood it, my task in posing the question was to wait and to listen with respect and thoughtfulness for the retrospective of stories which would be revealed in the present. These stories, I hoped, would shed light on the past by allowing the women to revisit an old situation in a new way. Their stories would aid them in going back, in re-membering reflectively (van Manen, 1990) not to change an unchangeable situation, but to reinterpret it creatively; to seek its meaning so as to inform and animate the present.

Although the women in this study are all adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, there was no assumption that their experiences were identical. Rather, it was assumed that each woman's story would reveal unique aspects of her experience and personal history and that common threads among the stories would be found (Kaschak, 1992; van Manen, 1984). Interpretation of the stories, therefore, would be important to give them existence outside the immediate world of the individual woman. This meant finding an approach that, while remaining focused on the main intent of the inquiry (Kvale, 1983), would also allow for flexibility and a permeable lens through which to view "everyday existence" (van Manen, 1990, p.11) as the women revealed it.

The question "how does the experience of CSA affect the female adult survivor's spirituality?" is a question that seeks understanding. It asks what is the nature of the impact that CSA has on her spirituality? The question of the female adult survivor's spirituality is a question of meaning. Meaning, I felt, would not be found in the recitation of a litany of facts nor would it come by attention only to the present. Meaning is not constructed all at once nor is it unchanging. It is a development, a process which is qualitative rather than linear or quantitative in its movement. How, then, could a question of meaning be approached?

It was adult female survivors that I needed to understand and their lives that I needed to explore. Walker (1989) had already established the appropriateness of using qualitative methods in interviewing women who experienced childhood sexual abuse. She observed that such methods are sympathetic to women's response styles and take account of the social context of their lives. The particular qualitative method chosen as the medium for this inquiry was hermeneutic phenomenology. van Manen (1990) noted that the terms "phenomenology" and "hermeneutics", often used interchangeably, signify two approaches which are based in philosophy and are, therefore, reflective. Hermeneutic phenomenology, with its dual emphasis on the description and interpretation of lived experience (van Manen, 1990) allowed space for the women's detailed stories ("rich" or "thick" descriptions) to emerge while also being directed at the discovery of meaning and the achievement of understanding (Laird, 1990).

In addition to the considerations already mentioned, hermeneutic phenomenology was considered appropriate for this study for the following reasons. First, its emphasis on participation, sharing, consensus and "heedful, mindful wondering about...what it means to live a life" (van Manen, 1990) reflected philosophically and practically, my preferred way of being in the world. Such an emphasis allowed for the connection, mutuality and reciprocity deemed important by women (Witherall and Noddings, 1991) and was an important dynamic of the conversations the women and I had together. Secondly, as "a search for the fullness of living" (van Manen, 1990; p. 12), I felt it offered a natural and complementary channel for an exploration of spirituality. Thirdly, as I was not interested in *evaluating* spirituality but seeking to describe and understand the experiences and behaviours that the female survivors called spirituality, hermeneutic phenomenology was methodologically well suited to my task.

Researching Lived Experience

In speaking about "lived experience", we are speaking about the everyday life world, the experience of being in the world, the world as it is made known through our consciousness. "Whatever falls outside of consciousness therefore falls outside the bounds of our possible lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p.9). Ermarth (1978) observed that

> Lived experience is the "originary" way in which we perceive reality... We "live through" life with an intimate sense of its concrete, qualitative features and myriad patterns, meaning, values and relations (p.97).

However, it is not possible to reflect on lived experience as it is happening and, while we may live with "an intimate sense" of its meaning, that meaning is "usually hidden or veiled" (van Manen, 1990, p.27). Thus, phenomenological reflection is necessarily retrospective. Lived experience is remembered in a myriad of conversations, dreams, stories through which we assign it meaning. Such reflective gathering focuses not so much on the "what" (facts) as the "essence or nature" of an experience - on "what this particular experience [is] like" (van Manen, 1990) - and what it means. Both the description of lived experience and the meaning implicit in it must be rendered explicit through language. The intent of hermeneutic phenomenology "is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36) thus it aims at uncovering what makes a particular experience distinct. This "essence", which is explored through the particular and the unique, is a universal made up of the most fundamental and unvarying elements (themes) of the lived experience (Giorgi, 1985).

Many examples of the lived experience under study are gathered (Polkinghorne, 1981; van Manen, 1990). Through them multiple shades and dimensions of meaning are revealed. Through conversations between researcher and participants, the "essential aspects" or "meaning structures" (themes) are drawn together and explicitly revealed through text in such a way that "a possible interpretation" of the universal meaning (van Manen, 1990, p.41) of the lived experience is produced. No claim is made that the interpretation thus gleaned is definitive in any way. As van Manen notes (1990, p.31)

> A phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially *richer* or *deeper* description.

The power of a study of this kind, then, lies in its ability to help us understand our questions of meaning more deeply and, through that understanding, to be transformed so that we "may be able to act more thoughtfully and more tactfully" (p. 23).

Preparation for the Study

As noted in chapter one, my initial question about the impact of childhood sexual abuse upon adult female survivors' spirituality originated in my encounter with Katy. The struggle of Katy and other women to understand their experience and to give it meaning raised numerous questions for me about the impact of childhood sexual abuse and about spirituality. In reflecting on their situation and the questions it engendered, I was faced with questions of my own. Where had my initial answers about the meaning of life come from? Where did I get those answers now? What voices, stories and scripts informed my spirituality? How did I define the sacred in my life? Where did sexuality fit into my understanding of spirituality? Through whose eyes did I view my life? By whose standards was I living? Who and what defined my life? At a deep level, the women's questions were my questions also. They did not come of my own choosing but arrived as gifts to be cherished.

In human science research, this bias is acknowledged. Human science does not claim that it is possible to be "objective", to stand outside of one's own experience but rather suggests that the *collective* experience of the researcher (who always uses self as an instrument) and the "co-participants" (Ellis, 1991b) is important. Indeed, Ellis and Flaherty (1992) and Richardson (1988) have argued that the researcher may even include herself as a participant or subject in her own research and her own lived experience as data for that research. While I did not choose that route, I realized that I could not completely separate myself from the enterprise in which I was engaged. At the same time, I was also aware of the importance of not allowing my own experience to influence that of the women. Their experience and mine would cross common lines while also retaining their differences.

When I began this study, I already had some familiarity with phenomenology and hermeneutics through graduate study. Through a project I had undertaken as part of that study, I had some intuition about and practical skill in conducting a phenomenological inquiry. To deepen my familiarity with the process of data collection and analysis as well as to "test" the question I was proposing, I conducted a pilot study. Prior to and concurrent with that study, I read about qualitative research, sexual abuse and spirituality. The pilot study helped me to elucidate my personal preunderstandings of spirituality as well as those present in the research and the "popular" literature. However, interviews conducted for the pilot study do not form part of the final data for this research.

One indirect way in which I had prepared myself for this study was through my training as a therapist (that is, my training as a therapist was pursued with a wider aim in mind). Similarities between human science interviewing and existential approaches to therapy had been observed by Kvale (1983) and Colaizzi (1978). Others who have engaged in this type of approach to thesis writing have also noted its therapeutic effect (Laframboise 1993).

While participation in the study was clearly not intended to be a substitute for or an alternative mode of therapy, all of the women stated that their participation had beneficial effects on them. Sofia, for example, observed: "Talking like this helped me realize that other women in the study had similar experiences and feelings to my own. It also helped

me see how my own insights have changed over time and how far I've come in letting go of the old messages that bound me." Hyacinth stated: "Being able to talk about such an intimate and important part of myself, has been wonderful. Spirituality is a subject on which even my church has been silent. Thank you for these golden moments." All said they would recommend participation in such a study to others. Ruth and Hyacinth stated that interest in being participants had been expressed by two male survivors they knew. The establishment of safety and trust, the stance of active and empathetic listening, the open and non-judgmental attitude essential to therapy, were also essential ingredients which I sought to bring to the research enterprise. The women stated that these conditions were met and perceived them as aids to their being able to provide the kind of detailed description that was vital to the study.

Conducting the Inquiry

Ethical Precautions

This study was given ethical approval by the Ethics Committee, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta. The consent form detailed voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and possible risks.

Any woman who was engaged in therapy when she contacted the writer was encouraged to discuss participation in the study with her therapist before proceeding. The experience under investigation was of a personal and sensitive nature. It was anticipated that participants might be sensitized to psychosocial difficulties and provision had been made for referral to appropriate professional resources should they have been needed or requested. At some points during the conversations, there were expressions of sorrow and distress. I did my best to be respectful and compassionate in my responses. At such times, the pace and direction of the conversation were adjusted according to each woman's expressed need. By mutual agreement, none of the conversations was discontinued.

The Co-participants: Our Women

The essential data for this study were obtained from six adult women who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse and who felt that their experience of sexual abuse had influenced what they called their spirituality. All had been sexually abused in their childhood and had not revealed their experience to anyone until they were adults (Appendix A).

Survivors are often reluctant to talk about their abusive experience particularly with someone they don't know. For me, this presented a challenge. I wanted the women to speak openly about a subject that they had been required to keep hidden for most of their lives. For this reason, one of the criteria I had set for inclusion was that the women's conversations with me would not be their initial disclosure about their childhood experience. I wanted the women to have done some reflection on and healing of their childhood abuse. To ensure this, I asked that only those women who had been or were

currently engaged in some sort of therapy for issues specifically related to the abuse would offer themselves as conversational partners. I also felt it was important that the women who presented themselves for inclusion in the study would have given some thought to their experience in light of the question. They also needed to be able to talk deeply and in specific and concrete detail (Colaizzi, 1978) about what spirituality meant for them in general and in the context of their experience of childhood sexual abuse. Selection of the co-participants was thus accomplished through purposive sampling (Morse, 1989).

A written description of the intended study, which included an invitation to participate in it, was posted in the offices of professional colleagues in the Edmonton area (Appendix B). Participants were also invited to take part in the study through word of mouth solicitation by some therapists I know. Seven women from the Edmonton area contacted me. This number included the woman with whom I conducted the pilot study. All were willing and able to address the question I had proposed. Six women actually participated.[2] The marriage and a subsequent move prevented the woman with whom I conducted the pilot study from completing her participation. Although it was not requested or considered a necessary part of the study, two of Our Women also brought forward some of their writing about their experience as part of the data.

When Our Women first called me to express their interest in the study, we briefly reviewed the intent of the study and the approximate time commitment each would need to make. I also encouraged Our Women to ask any questions about the study which had not already been answered and to express any reservations they might have. As five identified themselves by first names only when they called, the initial telephone contact allowed them a relatively anonymous opportunity to decide on the basis of their first impressions whether they felt comfortable with proceeding to the first face-to-face conversation. All of Our Women remarked that the relatively anonymous opportunity to "check [me] out" was an important factor in their decision to commit fully to the research process.

Our Women stated that their chief reason for participating in the study was that it provided a vehicle for talking about an integral aspect of their lives that they had had little opportunity to address particularly in such a focused way. They also noted that spirituality was not often a topic of exploration in the therapeutic environment and yet each felt it was an elemental aspect of her journey to wholeness.

It may appear that conversations with so few women would provide only a small window through which to view lived experience. That does not appear to be the case as Our Women provided rich and deep descriptions of their experience. The interpretation presented here is in no way intended as a final commentary on their experience or on the

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[2] From this point, the six women who participated in the study will be known collectively as Our Women. The term Our Woman may also be used. Individually, Our Women will be referred to by their own names. Originally, the study referred to the participants as "The Survivors". Later, the term "Survivor Women" was chosen. After further reflection, both of these terms were discarded in favour of the term "Our Women" which, I feel, is devoid of the limitations implied by the other two terms. Secondly, I believe the term "Our Women" reflects the shared nature of the relationship that is opened up between the women whose lives are written here and those who read them.

experience of other adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Questions of meaning cannot be answered once for all; they have no "final" conclusions. Instead, if we dare to live them, they can take us on an ever-deepening journey of understanding. This study is but one moment in that journey.

The Conversations

Our Women gave generously of their time and themselves. Finding a space that was free from distraction as well as comfortable and convenient was important. By mutual agreement, all but two interviews were conducted in my home or office. One of the remaining two took place in my office; the other took place in Valerie's home. Before the conversations turned to the question under consideration, the nature of the study was explained. Our Women's right to withdraw from the study at any time was made explicit. None chose to withdraw but two of Our Women remarked that knowing they had a choice to do so was freeing. A consent form to indicate their willingness to participate was signed by each Woman. (Appendix C)

Two or three conversations of an hour to an hour and a half took place with each Woman. The movement of the conversations was intended to allow them to happen with as little interference as possible from me. Our Women were invited to address the question in whatever way they felt would best convey their reflection upon it. Some probing questions were asked especially later in the process when particular situations as the women had presented them were explored (Kvale, 1983). Many specific and concrete examples (Polkinghorne, 1981) of how the experience of being sexually abused as a child touched each Woman's spirituality were sought throughout the conversations. The stories were aimed at providing as rich a description as possible of what each Woman's experience was really like (Colaizzi, 1978; van Manen, 1990).

All conversations were audiotaped (first credibility check). Later I transcribed them and, while reviewing the tapes, I edited the transcripts. A copy of the transcript of our respective conversations was provided to each Woman before the next meeting. Our Women told me that reading their words had a great impact on them. Somehow the printed word expanded the original conversations and, in reviewing their transcripts for accuracy and completeness, Our Women observed that between them and the transcribed words another conversation seemed to take place. Our Women's existing insights into themselves, deepened or consolidated, along with new insights gained were related to me as the conversations progressed. Between conversations I also read and re-read the transcripts with a view to drawing out from each Woman's talk whatever seemed central to it. I made notations about my global impressions which I checked with each Woman in subsequent conversations (second credibility check). Subsequent interviews extended and deepened data collection. As the conversations progressed, some took on more of a hermeneutic flavour than was characteristic of the initial discourses. In these moments, the meaning of Our Women's experience was opened up through mutual reflection upon it (van Manen, 1990).

Between meetings, strains of the conversations would go through my head like a familiar melody. I wrote my thoughts and impressions on the back of grocery receipts, on the inside covers of books, in the margins of books or articles I was reading. In addition to this spontaneous sort of journal writing, I also kept new insights, questions, impressions, points needing expansion, new ideas and comments in a couple of notebooks in a more or less orderly fashion. Emerging themes and the process used in arriving at them was also recorded. The conversations ended quite naturally with Our Women and I feeling that the talk was sufficiently complete and a gradual silence fell upon us (Becker, 1986; Kvale, 1983; van Manen, 1990).

After the cycle of face-to-face conversations had ended, I worked and sometimes prayed with the transcribed conversations in an effort to discover the essence they could reveal. Occasionally, I returned to one or other of Our Women to test my interpretation or seek further clarification. Sometimes Our Women were graced with new insights which they shared with me over the phone or a cup of coffee. In all of these things, the dependability and the confirmability of the research were strengthened.

Finding the Themes

One day I was sipping tea and studying the intricacies of a mitra stictica I had randomly chosen from a large bowl of seashells which keep me anchored to my salty Atlantic roots. I was reminded that merely looking at the shell, I was seeing only part of it. The inside texture of the shell and the small animal that once inhabited it were not readily available for inspection nor would they ever be. Yet the outer and inner aspects of the shell were intimately bound together. Stories are like seashells - their details allow us to see the particular hue and shape that defines each one. The interpretation - the meaning - we take from them provides a glimpse into their interior dimensions where their real life is revealed. The way the shell spiraled became symbolic of the process of analyzing and interpreting the transcribed texts. My initial interpretation of the stories was global; it provided an overall impression. In subsequent conversations, Our Women were informed of these impressions which in turn brought forward deeper insights. A spiraling occurred so that, over time, particular aspects woven throughout the stories were highlighted and the nature of Our Women's experience was revealed.

In more precise terms, data were analyzed through several steps (Giorgi, 1985; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; van Manen, 1990; Wertz, 1986;). As presented here, the steps appear linear. This is for clarification only. The actual process, as noted, was spiral. Each successive step or stage of the process helped bring the essence or essential themes more sharply into focus. Upon completion of the interviews and accurate transcription of the stories, I gathered all the data I had for each Woman into a file. The process of data analysis and interpretation began.

(1) I reread each Woman's story in totality to get an overall impression of her talk. I made brief notes about what stood out.

(2) Next, sections of the transcript which were significant were highlighted (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These were then paraphrased as a transitory step toward interpretation.

(3) Line by line analysis of the text was done to abstract any particular meaning units or themes. This process was facilitated by placing the actual text in one column and the emergent pattern or theme as well as comments in a parallel column. At this stage, the analysis was primarily descriptive rather than interpretive. Themes were described in Our Women's own language.

(4) Each Woman's data was examined as a totality. Separate themes as well as interrelation between themes was noted. Sketching each Woman's experience in a diagrammatic way using a simple webbing technique helped clarify my thinking.

(5) Next, comparisons and contrasts between participants were examined so that essential and incidental themes could be more clearly seen. The primary mode shifted from description to interpretation. Writing and rewriting, an integral part of this research approach, was the project of interpreting the exposed themes. Throughout the writing and rewriting process, reflection and analysis continued as themes were expressed in text. Comparison and contrast among the stories produced a gestalt wherein essential and incidental themes were revealed. Decisions about what to include and what to leave out were constantly adjusted as the process evolved. Comments and anecdotes were chosen from the interview material, notes and other sources which best illustrated and elucidated the phenomenon being studied.

(6) The shaping and articulation of my ongoing understanding of Our Women's experience was assisted in several ways. When I had completed "step four", each of the interviews was checked by two independent colleagues. This served to verify that the themes I was proposing were reasonable. Additional segments of the interviews which were deemed to be significant but which I had missed were brought to my awareness (third credibility check). A few were also merged with others. Some colleagues and friends read various drafts of the text as I completed them offering insight and critical reflection. In this way, my understanding was tested, leading to a deepening of the essential standards of strength, richness and depth of the developing text (Diekelmann, 1990; van, Manen, 1990).

Human Science Research

Human science research does not offer " a different tool-kit for dealing with the same kinds of problems and questions" (van Manen, 1990, p.21) than empirical analytic science ("traditional") seeks to answer. Therefore, the criteria by which its value is measured cannot be those which belong to that tradition or its methods. Notions such as objectivity (how unbiased or neutral are the findings?), reliability (how dependable and consistent are the findings over time?), external validity (how generalizable are the findings to other contexts or persons?) and internal validity (how well does the study actually measure the intended object of the study?) do not capture the spirit of human science research.

How, then, should human science research be evaluated? There is some debate about which criteria should be applied in the evaluation. An interpretive stance, using aesthetically oriented criteria, has been advanced by van Manen (1990) while Giorgi (1993) argues that a primarily descriptive approach is defensible. van Manen (1990, p.151-

152) sets forth the following criteria by which a human science study may be appropriately and meaningfully evaluated. First, a text needs to be oriented. This means the researcher must make clear the particular stance (e.g., as a teacher, a therapist) from which he or she is writing. Second, a text needs be strong. This is accomplished by using one's stance to clarify one's research interests. Since one's interests come out of one's stance and shape one's perspective, they will be different from those whose stance is different. Third, a text needs to be rich. Through using anecdotes and descriptions, many dimensions and multiple meanings of a phenomenon are explored. The intention is to include and engage the reader and to provoke a response. Fourth, the text needs to be deep. Reader and writer must be willing to go past the surface, past the obvious to the meaning structures that lie beyond immediate experience and, in so doing, touch the "fundamental ambiguity and mystery" of life.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have provided criteria which they believe parallel the standards of empirical analytic science and strengthen the "trustworthiness" of human science research. The terms confirmability (objectivity), dependability (reliability), transferability (external validity) and credibility (internal validity) signify these parallel criteria. The researcher ensures the reliability and truth of his or her findings (satisfies the criteria) by such activities as: prolonged engagement, triangulation (using varieties of data, investigators or theories), member checks, replication, completing an audit and providing contextual details that allow others to assess transferability. The underlying assumption in all of this, of course, is that with the "right method" one can arrive at results that properly reflect human existence.

van Manen (1990) warns against too rigid an adherence to method and technique. Methodological precision should not be at the expense of the creative imaginativeness and insight which are characteristic of the discovery-oriented approach of human science. In this study, there was no expectation that the "final results" would be generally applicable to all adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse or that the study could be repeated to yield identical data or that a description of how childhood sexual abuse affects all women survivors' spirituality could be provided that would allow for measurement or comparison of the effects. Human science is based on the assumption that human perception is perspectival and contextual; the same phenomenon is open to several interpretative perspectives. Sameness can arise out of the inconsistency, variability and relativity of human perception. The basis of social reality is intersubjective agreement; therefore, meaning may be common despite variations of "fact" from one participant to another. As Bollnow (1974) stated: "The community and universality of truth means that we engage with others, in full reciprocal openness, and that in such a testing and clarifying dialogue we stand on the common ground of rational discussion" (p.13). Any interpretation or description, then, that is argued persuasively (i.e., is supported by references from the data and allows for discussion and sharing about the particular point of view) and with which we agree, may be considered valid. Lived experience is much larger than any interpretation can encompass. The knowledge gained is always partial; therefore, the insights offered may or may not be valid in another context or another time (Kirk and Miller, 1986). A credible or trustworthy report, then, is one which tells a

convincing story arousing a response in readers that says "yes, these things happened and I now understand why they might have occurred and what they might mean".

In doing this study, I have aimed at trustworthiness. If another researcher were provided with copies of the transcribed conversations, my jottings and journal notes, he or she should be able to follow my steps, formulate similar conclusions or understand the ones I've reached. As already noted, others were engaged in the interpretive process along the way so as to assist me in drawing out my unquestioned biases. I have also endeavoured to be creative in the writing and re-writing. I've learned that writing is a difficult and messy process which, in some sense, is never completed. The questions which initiated this journey have not been answered once for all. I would rather continue to face the questions and, with them myself, than to "find some excuse to avoid [them] by suspending further conversation ... or by turning to something less threatening" (Bollnow, 1974, p.15).

CHAPTER 4

SHATTERED CONNECTIONS: WHERE DO I BELONG?

I ache with the betrayal of my love/touch the lies that paint my skin ugly/raw wounds beneath.

(Lillian Green, *Ordinary Wonders*, 1992)

I did not lose myself all at once. I rubbed out my face over the years washing away my pain, the same way carvings on stone are worn down by water.

(Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989)

The love of God, God's love. She wonders, a little enviously, what it feels to be part of that holy contract.

(Carol Shields, *The Republic of Love*, 1992)

There is something she'd like to say, but she doesn't know how to begin. Or no, there are three ways she would like to begin, she doesn't know which one is the right one. "Let me tell you what I'm like." "Let me tell you about myself." Or: "Let me tell you who I am"...There is nothing she can say. She can't even tell him the story that is in her mind.

(Mary Gordon, *The Rest of Life*, 1993.)

Introduction

Reflecting on Our Women's stories, what emerged most clearly and consistently was the importance of connection, of belonging, as critical to spirituality. The sense of loss of connection from themselves, from their bodies, from God and from others which their childhood experience of sexual abuse engendered in them is the first of the four major conversational themes and the subject of this chapter.

In their book "Belonging to the Universe", Capra and Steindl-Rast (1992) describe religious experience or Religion as "the encounter with mystery". The "way of being that flows from the religious experience" (p.13) is what they term spirituality. Central to religious experience is an experience of belonging - a sense of "I find my place here. I am not orphaned". This implicit or felt sense of being at home, of belonging needs to exist even when there is no one else around (p.127-128). Belonging is a two-pronged reality. On the one hand, it is to possess something; "to be the owner of" something. On the other, it is to "have a proper or suitable place; to be part of; to be connected to" something (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1991) greater than my self - a community, a love relationship, nature, Ultimate reality.

The experience of being sexually abused left Our Women in a state that is aptly named by William James as "torn-to-pieces-hood" - of being fractured, divided, cut off, orphaned.

Our Women felt homeless in the most profound sense of that word: not in the sense of having no bed for the night, not even in the wider sense of being homeless but in the deepest sense of having no place wherein they belong, where they are connected. Broken within and cut off from without, they found themselves fundamentally estranged - not belonging to themselves, not at home in their bodies, not at home with family or others, not at home in the world, not at home with God.

Disconnection from the Body

In his book *A Brief History of Time,* physicist Stephen Hawking (1988) speaks about the "four forces" which have been at work from the initial moments of the creative fire (p.70-71). Gravity, the most familiar of these forces, is a way of describing a power beyond our comprehension. It is about the mystery of attraction. We know from science that the energy of attraction is universal and binds all creation - it is in quarks, music, the planets, the body. It is what cosmologist Brian Swimme (1985) calls "cosmic allurement". In human beings, this cosmic allurement, made intentional and conscious, is known as love and "ignites being" (p.49). It finds embodied expression in human sexuality.

If we assume that human sexuality is a reflection of the playful intention of a creative God, then passion, sexual pleasure, being caressed and cuddled, all pleasurable sensations in the body, bodily contours, other sensuous experiences are all part and parcel of the gift of being incarnate. Our capacity for these bodily experiences was placed in us, at our innermost selves, from the beginning of life. If a child's early exploration of her body is seen to be part of healthy development, she learns that her body is good; that it belongs to her; that she is in charge. She learns to experience her body as something safe, to be trusted, worthy of care and caress. She learns that sexual energy is something to be embraced and carried responsibly. Unless she is taught otherwise by others, she will carry this knowledge with her throughout her life. She will trust and, in the context of trust, will risk reaching out to others, will risk intimacy. Sexuality will be for her a healthy expression of relational development throughout her life.

Our relational history exerts a strong influence on our capacity for friendship, how we interact with and relate to others and the divine. Sexuality, as the power of personal attraction to others, is integral to the spiritual life. Sexuality is not one dimension of life nor is its totality expressed in sexual acts. It is about our desire to connect, to belong, to be at home and is the foundation of our connection to all things. It is the basis of our power to relate to others as female or male. It is expressed in all our relationships - how we parent, work, play and in how we relate to the divine.

Sexual Abuse: Ties that Betray

The experience of sexual abuse powerfully shapes an individual's relational history. It shatters trust; it destroys intimacy - it teaches Our Woman that by allowing herself to be open to another, her self will be taken away. It tells her that her body is not her own. Sexually abusive experiences create a template marked with shame, confusion,

ambivalence, anger and guilt. Through being touched in a sexually abusive way, Our Woman learns that flesh is bad and untrustworthy, that touch is associated with uneasiness, alienation and shame. The experience of sexual abuse makes survivors exiles from their own bodies - cut off from and uncomfortable with them - a direct contradiction to an incarnational spirituality. We are embodied and, therefore, sensual. When the body is considered bad or an object of hate, the sensuous is also mistrusted. Being sensuous, however, is a means of deepening our connection with our bodies and with the whole of creation. Such connection is missing for those who feel as Denise did:

> I was ashamed of my body. I could not touch it in a gentle way. I abused it an awful lot. I lifted heavy things that I should never have lifted - fridges out of motor homes, heavy engines and things like that. I'd get a sore back but instead of resting it, I'd lift even more. The sorer my back was, the more abuse I gave it. I'd say to my body 'you deserve this'.

Denise could not acknowledge that her body needed care and love. Her hatred of her female body was so deep that she often

> wanted to be male and I did male things. I hung around with guys. I didn't have a girlfriend. I wanted to do guys' work and so I became an R.V. mechanic. I *hated* being female. I wore big, baggy clothes to hide my body and my femaleness. I didn't want anybody to see my body. 'Hide yourself' was what it taught me.

With a normal sense of autonomy, children learn that they can have a point of view; express their own initiative, their own wishes; make mistakes. They also learn that even though most people are bigger, stronger and more powerful than they, there is room for negotiation, for making choices. The sense of autonomy - of control over her own body, bodily functions, opinions, choices - develops best in an atmosphere where the child trusts that there's room for give and take; that it's not the tyranny of the strong over the weak or the bigger over the smaller. In sexually abusive situations, the child learns the opposite. She can't say "No"; her choice will not be honoured; her body doesn't belong to her; there's no room for negotiation. Sexual abuse *is* the rule of the bigger over the smaller and the strong over the weak. Instead of a healthy sense of autonomy and self-respect, Our Woman learns that there are only victims and victors; those who rule and those who submit. As Ruth learned, these lessons are not forgotten simply by the act of growing up:

> ...I was an object - even for my husband. I felt I was obligated to have sex with my husband - my mother had told me this and the experience of sexual abuse certainly taught me this. I didn't know who I was pleasing by complying - whether it was my husband, my mother, God. I didn't think of it as pleasing myself. My own pleasure was a byproduct. It was okay but the main thing was that my husband would get sexual gratification. I thought that it was his right to demand that from me. I would have sex with my husband even though I really did not want to and then I reached a

point where I wouldn't have sex with him. I would say "No". But he never accepted that. He could never accept the "No" and just leave it at that. And then I wouldn't stand up for myself or say what I wanted or needed. I allowed myself to be an object for others - just to be there for them all the time with no thought whatever for myself.

Without a healthy sense of autonomy, without the expectation that one's "No" means "No", without the option to make choices, Our Woman has little with which to defend herself against those who misuse their strength or size. Abused from infancy by her mother and grandmother and, as she got older, by others, Fiona's earliest relational experiences became a pattern for all her encounters with others. Later, as Fiona tells us, this pattern was enacted in all her relationships:

I hated myself and I hated the terrible things that had happened to me, to my body...I was vulnerable and didn't have any boundaries. Abuse was what I knew best. So I thought I had to behave sexually toward *everyone*...I was so vulnerable to being abused over and over. I had my first child when I was only thirteen. By age seventeen, I had four children - all by different men.

For Hyacinth, the experience of being sexually abused powerfully shaped her ideas about relationships between men and women.

I had misinformation in my brain about how I should be with men. I was terrified of men...This type of abuse or use by men left a great confusion in me about relationships with men. I sure didn't want to get married...Although my husband and I joke now about our six year courtship, it was really my waiting game. I did *not* want to be married to *any* man.

In the experience of sexual abuse, the body is betrayed. Our Woman is made to ignore the discomfort in her body; to tune it out. Ruth learned this well. Even as an adult she often ignored the normal demands of her body:

My feet would hurt from ill fitting shoes but I wouldn't take them off. My body would tell me I needed to go to the bathroom but I would ignore its need. I didn't listen to anything my body had to tell me.

The body's betrayal may also be seen in physical ways as was the case for Denise.

When I first started seeing a therapist, my whole body had ended up to be big scabs. I had eczema all over my body...and guess where most of the scabs were? Here and here (pointing to her buttocks, abdomen and breasts). At that time, I hadn't made the connection that the scabs were all over those parts of my body that I hated the most. I didn't realize that these scabs were manifestations of the hatred I felt for myself and my body...I'm just beginning to feel my body from here (her chest) instead of only

from here (her throat) - that's just beginning. I'm just beginning to breathe from the gut instead of just from the shoulders. And I still have a long way to go to get back the rest of my body -to feel from the waist down.

Sofia's hatred of her body which stemmed from her many sexually abusive experiences was played out over and over again in self-stimulating behaviour which, as a child, she had learned was sinful, "intrinsically evil" and deserving of God's punishment. She entered religious life, thinking that because she would be living a "celibate life, I wouldn't have to think about sex or my body anymore". Sofia discovered that living in a convent did not bring the hoped for resolution of her childhood experience of sexual abuse but merely drove it underground for a while.

Masturbation continued to be a problem for me for much of my adolescent and adult life. There was a lull there from about age 14 to when I was about 25 when everything seemed to be settled and going fine and then - well, all hell broke loose. I had never had any proper kind of sex education or learned the proper ways of dealing with such things. I really didn't know what to do with all this and the feelings that were emerging and I turned it against myself and the only outlet that I felt was there was for me, for all my emotions was masturbation...The more I masturbated, the more condemned I felt. The more negative I felt about myself, the more I masturbated as a way of proving to myself just how bad and unworthy before God I really was...It was a problem for me - I mean a really big problem for a long time - until about 12 years ago. And even then it kept popping up occasionally.

Is There No Way to Escape?

Dissociation, a voluntary or involuntary induction of an altered state of consciousness, is a way of dealing with the abuse when physical escape is impossible. Some survivors learn to dissociate while they are being sexually abused. It helps spare them from the overwhelming emotional and physical pain of the abusive experience. The body becomes something to be escaped, disowned - they seek to be disembodied. Such was the case for Valerie:

I remember going out of my body; not feeling attached to it or being in it. I remember being on the ceiling and looking down at my body. I think it was a way of coping with the abuse; of saying 'your body and your mind can't handle any more of this'. I also remember a time when I was very, very depressed...I hadn't been eating at all and I was down to eighty-five pounds and was waiting for a bed in the hospital. I remember...lying on the couch and I went up out of my body. And I remember being really shocked the first time I looked down and saw how ill I was. I remember looking at this very thin body and thinking 'Oh, that's really sick'.

Fiona, too, used dissociation as a means of escape from the sexual abuse of family members. "There's no physical escape when the abuser lives with you - I had no outer escape so I escaped inwardly by splitting off from my body. The eagle would come down and pick me up and take me away". For Fiona, escape brought her to "the Great One" who provided the comfort she desired but did not receive from those around her:

> I would let my inner self be taken to safety. The Great One would appear to me as a great eagle and we would fly up to his heaven and I would play with the Great One's son, Enoch, in the fields...And we would count all the animals and we would have rabbit for our supper. We would be together and roast the rabbit over the fire and the Great One would talk to me and I would listen. The Great One would hold me and was very gentle and loving towards me.

Escaping one's body while the abuse is occurring is understood as an adaptive feature, a way of coping with an untenable situation. However, survivors often carry on the strategy long after the risk of actual abuse has passed. In so doing, many experiences which would enrich Our Woman's life are made unavailable. Although Fiona's escape brought her to a place where she felt nurtured and cared for by the Great One, escape became habitual even when it was not necessary:

> In school I would just sit there. I wouldn't hear a word; I didn't see what was going on...Every now and then I'd speak and it would seem to others like I was present because my body was there. But to this day, I couldn't tell you what was going on. I was never present. It was like that throughout most of my school years and much of my adult life. And it affected my way of relating to the Great One. I could only find the Great One when I escaped my body. I had to learn to find the Great One *in* my body, in my femaleness, in reality...And for years, I thought sex was something that happened to the body when I wasn't there. I wasn't involved in it...I lived in my own little world and nobody could enter it but me.

Staying in her body, being at home in it was also a struggle for Valerie who

> spent most my life being spaced out; doing things with my hands and not having them feel attached to the rest of my body; watching my hands doing dishes or whatever they were doing. I was watching from a distance...the bottom part of my body especially didn't felt like it was attached - it was separated; severed and this part of me (pointing to her head) didn't like [the abuse] that was happening to this part of me (indicating her lower abdomen and genitals).

For Ruth, it was necessary to be "on guard all the time" She was "always aware of what was going on at one level but I was completely separated from it at the feeling, bodily level". Later, Ruth came to realize that such distancing kept her not only from

herself but from others as well: "There was a wall between me and others; they were near but they were never close".

Sexuality and Spirituality: Never the Twain Shall Meet

Sexual abuse hinders Our Woman's capacity for true intimacy. In sexual abuse, intimacy - the "inmost character", the "most private or personal"; the "very familiar", the "very close" (Webster's New World Dictionary) - is used as the vehicle for betrayal of trust and of the body. Ordinary human acts such as kissing, touching, caressing which Our Woman is told are good-"out there"- feel very bad - "in here", in Our Woman's inmost self. Sexual abuse creates a crisis of sexuality, the relational energy for love, connection, intimacy and friendship. Sexuality is split off from the body emotionally, psychically and spiritually. Domination and disconnection replace mutuality and connection. Our Woman learns that relationship is about violation rather than closeness. The "letting go", of being vulnerable that is essential to healthy sexual self-expression is inhibited. Denise speaks directly to this issue: "The abuse affected our marriage. I had always had trouble with becoming sexually aroused. I simply couldn't trust what would happen if I let myself go". Her sentiments are echoed and elaborated by Valerie:

> Being sexually abused affected my sexual relationship with my husband, too. I wasn't orgasmic until I was about 33. I couldn't let myself go; couldn't allow my body to say 'this is okay'... I had heard about this orgasm thing but I thought 'I never enjoy that - I've never experienced that even though I have a very patient, loving husband'...And I would often have to say to my husband [when he expressed sexual interest] 'no, not now. I just can't'.

For Our Woman, sex, a basic symbol for unity and the human desire to be one, was tragically distorted. As part of a creation that was declared good (Genesis 1:25), "sex is an avenue to the sacred, one of the ways [human beings] come to know divine comfort and healing" (Fischer, 1990, p.76). But a sexual relationship must involve the total person to be satisfying and regenerative. If Our Woman is cut off from her body, how can she involve herself in relationship as a total person? How can she experience the sights and smells and textures of creation and bring the bodily and the physical to her encounters with another or with the world? Denise observed the effects of such a split in herself: "I didn't see colours or smell the scent of flowers. I felt no joy, no pleasure. My senses were shut down. I was completely numb." Sofia's remark echoes that of Denise: "Simple things like taking a bath were viewed only as something necessary. I didn't think of them as pleasure, a gift to be enjoyed."

It is chiefly through the body that we can feel and express ourselves and our relationships with others, including the divine. Incarnation, the mystery of divine embodiment, tells us that the divine comes to us in and through our physical existence - through the aroma of baking bread; the grasp of a child's hand; the smile on a friend's face; the blue of the sky or the warmth of sun on our skin. It is through our bodiliness that we

relate to the divine and to others. All our relationships are mediated through our bodies. The world is brought to us through sense and feeling; how we relate physically to the world affects our minds. Doctrines and theologies provide only a limited understanding of the divine. Our deepest understanding of the divine is woven from our experiences which we live through our bodies. If Our Woman despises her body, she cannot also revere it nor understand its role as a "spiritual vessel"; as a place in which she can be completely at home with pleasure and delight.

In the conflicted attitude that sexual abuse creates, Our Woman learns to live in her mind, treating her body as something distinct and separate from her mind. As Denise observed, "I put myself in my head. I lived there. I didn't live in my body." The essential mind/body unity may be lost and with it, as Hyacinth tells us, the sense of being made in the image of the sacred is also lost.

> The experience of being sexually abused had left me feeling *so* yucky. I viewed my body negatively and *any* feelings in my body I viewed negatively, considered wrong. The abuse was centred in my body so I hated my body. I couldn't see how I could go to God being the way I was.

Expanding on this a little later, she says

> I remembered walking down the lane and feeling so ugly and dirty and I hated my panties to be wet. And in later life that affected how I experienced my sexuality within marriage because there was always that feeling of being wet and dirty and ugly. I really had to struggle to deal with that and I went through most of my life like that. What it did was make me feel sinful, ugly, dirty, used but most especially it made me feel like I wasn't normal like everyone else and that God couldn't possibly love me.

Ruth, too, described the struggle to accept that sexuality and spirituality were compatible.

> I thought sexual abuse was what all sex was about...I had to work on my thinking about sex. I thought sex was wrong. I *really* thought sex was *wrong*. The only thing I thought could make it even a bit - *a bit* - right was getting married...Once I got married there were still a lot of difficulties where sex was concerned... I still felt guilty about it and that affected my self-esteem, my perception of myself, of God - my spirituality at its core.

To be sexually abused is to experience violation; intrusiveness into one's body. It is an experience without equality or mutuality. It is to feel ashamed of one's physical nakedness as Denise did.

> God was always looking at me. His big eyes that saw everything were always looking at and seeing me. Even when I took off my clothes in the dark, I'd go like this

> (covering herself with her arms and her hands) because I was afraid that God would see me...I was ashamed of my body. I was *so* ashamed of my body.

Valerie recalls that her father's sexually abusive behaviour wrought a similar feeling in her; made her feel "dirty. I would feel that my body was dirty; invaded". That feeling stayed with her a long time. Even now, in her fifties, Valerie observed:

> I still have a problem getting fully undressed in front of my husband. I don't even like him to come into the room where I'm undressing. We've never showered together...I can get undressed in the dark and get into bed with him but I don't like him to see me naked. Even when I had a very good figure, I was never proud of my body...Being abused definitely had that impact on me...

This sentiment is also echoed in Hyacinth's description

> I often heard it said that "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit". For me it definitely was not. I thought that if I even took care of my body, I was being self-centred. I didn't put *any* importance on my body. I didn't know how to be sexual with my husband without feeling that it was ugly or that it wasn't God-like...I thought it was blasphemous to feel holiness in sexuality; in my body.

The sense of being dirtied by sexual abuse is not some superficial feeling that can be removed by washing oneself. It is deeply internalized as a stigma upon Our Woman's being. Pellauer (1987, p.89) observed that "dirt is not simply a matter of hygiene. It is also an entree into a cosmos." Quoting Mary Douglas, she adds:

> Dirt is relative; it is matter out of place. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom...Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism.

In the experience of child sexual abuse, everything - the touching, caressing, kissing, semen, saliva, removed clothing - is "out of place" because the child could not and did not consent to the experience.

It is also important to remember that the mythology about child sexual abuse has often identified the child herself as the "dirt", as the matter "out of place". This is clearly seen in comments such as "You didn't resist" or "If you knew he was going to abuse you, why didn't you stay away from him?" or "You're always trying to make trouble" which are often used as a means to justify the abusive behaviour or to deflect responsibility away from the perpetrator. Such statements say to Our Woman that it is she who is "out of place" and leave her feeling more convinced that she is "sinful, ugly, dirty", "ashamed of [her] body" and "totally responsible for what had happened to [her]." The cosmos thus

revealed implies that it is the one victimized who is dirty. However, a more accurate and trustworthy sense about the world's fundamental meaning, is that the domination and degradation of sexual abuse express a fundamental disorder in the universe. Sexual abuse is a desecration and a spiritual crisis. Our Woman's experience suggests that the integrity of the body is sacred. Sexual abuse debases precisely that which ought most fully be treasured.

Disconnection from Self: Where Can I Hide?

The experience of sexual abuse is a betrayal of trust. It is an experience of being treated as an object to be used instead of as a person to be loved and fosters a deep sense of shame. The experience of sexual abuse is fundamentally an experience of shame - of being stripped naked, literally as well as figuratively, and finding oneself wanting, insufficient, elementally flawed. To be ashamed is to expect rejection, not so much because of what one has done as because of who one believes she is. Kaufmann (1980) stated that "Sexual abuse [is] guaranteed by [its] nature to produce excessive shame - anytime the body is violated, that always leaves the person defeated and humiliated" (p.76). Sexual abuse is a damaging early experience which "distorts one's self-image, in part by implanting shameful, bad-me feelings that, often on an unconscious level, help explain the hurts one has received and why they are deserved" (Karen, 1992, p.65). Fiona, abused very early in her life by her mother and grandmother, felt her shame keenly:

> I was an outcast. I was unacceptable. I was unlovable. I was unworthy. Because I was a child I had to stay in my family and on the reserve but I didn't have a place there and there was no protection for me there. Everything good and happy was taken from me. I thought it was because I was bad and so all I deserved were bad things.

Shame, says Lewis Smedes (1993)

> is a very heavy feeling. It is a feeling that we do not measure up and maybe will never measure up to the sorts of persons we are meant to be...The feeling of shame is about our very *selves* - not about some bad thing we *did* or *said* but about what we *are*. It tells us that we are unworthy. Totally. It is not as if a few seams in the garment of our selves need stitching; the whole fabric is frayed.

Shame as an Identity

Kaufmann (1989) distinguishes between healthy shame and shame as an identity. Healthy shame is described as a passing emotion and a normal reaction to any situation in which a person is unexpectedly exposed and loses face. It is a reaction to a specific event. Shame as an identity occurs when a person feels alienated, deficient and hopeless in a general way. Such an experience contains within it

> the piercing awareness of ourselves as fundamentally deficient in some vital way as a human being. To live with shame is to experience the very essence or heart of the self as wanting. Shame is an impotence-making experience because it feels as though there is no way to relieve the matter, no way to restore the balance of things. *One has simply failed as a human being.* (p.8, italics added).

To feel shame as an identity is to have lost one's true identity and value as a person. It is to see oneself as inferior, fundamentally flawed. Such an identity gives rise to thinking about oneself which confirms and deepens the shame. Ruth was sure "...no one could love me as I was. Not even God." Denise thought, "If anyone knew me - I mean *really* knew me, I was sure they would reject me." This stance was also one from which Sofia lived. "For so long I believed I was *bad* and if you *really* knew me, you wouldn't love me or like me. So how could God love me? I didn't really know. I couldn't figure that one out." Hyacinth wondered: "How could anyone possibly love me? I didn't even love myself. Who I was was simply unacceptable."

Shame-based identity was an all too familiar reality to Our Women. Such unhealthy or false shame is a shame Our Woman does not deserve to feel but feels nonetheless. In the experience of sexual abuse the wrongdoing of the perpetrator becomes the shame of Our Woman and her shame drains her of her power to take pride in herself. Such shame deceives Our Woman into thinking she is far worse than she really is. At the same time, it blinds her to her own strengths. She feels she *is* something wrong and therefore, undeserving of love, cut-off and fearful. Hyacinth expressed it this way:

> Being sexually abused changed my image of myself and thus my understanding of who I was. My way of making sense of the abuse was by thinking I was base and useless; of no worth. Sexual abuse separated me from God, too, because I knew from then on I was sinful, ugly, unacceptable, worthless. I thought that all God knew of me was that I was a terrible person; I was bad. My image of *me* kept me distant from God. I always knew that God was a mighty God; that God was powerful and good but was inaccessible to me because of who I was...I felt that the inner core of me - which I believe is our identification with God- was disfigured, ugly, unacceptable. I felt bad for who I *was* and, in that shame, I closed my eyes. I was afraid. What happened was that I lost sight of who I *truly* was.

Perfectionism: Covering One's Shame

In identifying with her false-self, Our Woman is identifying with her persona, her mask. The more she identifies with the mask, the more she stays separated from her true self and from her life experiences. Shame makes her a stranger to herself. In an effort to cope with her distorted self-identity, Our Woman learns to look outside herself in an effort to feel whole and acceptable. She lives what Paul Tillich calls a "heteronomous" life - something external sets her priorities, establishes what is meaningful and worthwhile. She feels compelled to make up for what she believes she lacks inside by obeying someone

else's prescriptions on the outside. Once a shameful self-concept is established, "it is inevitably accompanied by imperatives and inhibitions, shoulds and should nots that govern one's life and become complexly intertwined in one's relationships" (Karen, 1992, p. 43). The illusion under which Our Woman lives is that if she can only follow the letter of the rules - if she can only be perfect - she will be acceptable. But this places Our Woman in a double bind: she believes she must be very, very good to earn others' approval while also knowing that she does not have it in her to be that good. Ruth shows this connection well.

> ...I thought I must have been a bad girl and *I* must have been the one who was doing something wrong. I tried to work this out by trying to be good. I really tried. I thought if I could just be good enough, I would be accepted. And I kept trying. I tried to be a good wife. I tried to be a good mother. I tried to be a good housekeeper. I tried to be a good seamstress. I just tried really hard to gain others' approval. I had to work very hard to make all of the bad stuff stop...I thought for all of this bad stuff to be happening to me, I *must* be bad. I *knew* that lots of bad things had happened to me. And I thought if I could only be *good* and then even *better* and do things just *perfectly*, then maybe the bad things would stop happening. I was a real perfectionist. I had hoped that somehow that would bring me acceptance or approval. I had hoped. But then it didn't work. Nothing was enough. And I felt even more like a failure, like a nothing.

Hyacinth's attempts to gain self-worth were similar to Ruth's:

> For most of my life, I was a performance-oriented person, a perfectionist. It was a way of trying to overcome the ugliness I felt inside. On the outside, I was a brilliant student but it didn't really matter because inside nothing changed. Still I kept up the performance - the appearance that everything was normal. And I was that way for most of my life - a performer.

Hyacinth and Ruth used perfectionism as a way to make themselves feel better about themselves and to recover a temporary sense of connectedness and importance. For Denise, looking after other's needs served the bill: "I *never* cared what I needed. I didn't *know* what I needed, I didn't even know what I *wanted*. I just figured if I looked after everyone else's needs, I'd be accepted." Valerie "constantly looked for my nurturing and nourishing in someone or something else. For instance, I looked for that in my husband. He had to be mother, father, friend - everything for a lot of years. I looked for perfection from him."

In Sofia's efforts to gain acceptance and a sense of personal value, she turned to religion:

> In retrospect, it seems like all the sexual abuse from age 4 to age 12 - as much as I'd been involved with that I then became involved with religious things. I turned to

> religious things. I can remember when I was 13 going to Mass every day and praying - asking God what it was he wanted...From age 13 to 16, it just kind of grew on me and then I entered the convent...And I remember a retreat in Grade 10 and trying to make a really good confession and really trying to clear up my whole childhood - to make it clean. I tried, in a moral sense, to feel at peace with God...For many years, I lived mainly by obeying the rules. And I did so with a lot of love but it didn't change who I was. I was still striving to be *perfect* and was not attentive to being who I really am; who I was called to be...My self-worth was not inside; it was in what I did so I had to do everything perfectly and unfortunately when I entered the convent that just got nurtured. Because I was immature and it was so ingrained in me already, I just had the veneer of religious life put on top of it.

For a time, Denise, too, thought that "religion would save [her]". She

> started going to church. And I thought, "I want to follow all the rules because if I follow all the rules then I can be saved"...I'd be saved from hell. I had some suicide attempts and the only thing that kept me from going through with them was the fear of hell. Suicide was *against the rules*. I thought if I really went through with it, that would be the end - I'd be in hell forever. So I followed the rules instead. And I got really hooked on religion because of the rules- on obeying the rules. I felt a righteousness in obeying the rules and thinking I'd be saved by obeying the rules. And then I thought I'd be saved by converting everybody else. But I only got even more cut off from myself and God and everyone else.

Hyacinth described her religious practice as

> part of a rule-oriented religion. Keeping the church rules, obeying the commandments - that's what I thought really counted... Part of that was the all-knowing God who knew everything about me - I couldn't even think an evil thought but God knew it and therefore I was condemned by it so there was always that need to be perfect. *Perfect.* To make myself worthy; to make myself matter. But it never worked. There was no way to be perfect and my lack of perfection only confirmed what I already knew. That I was sinful, unworthy, of no account. The harder I worked, the deeper I got myself into the dark hole.

Our Woman covers her shame with perfection as a way of having control in her life. Perfection demands that Our Woman be "super responsible" and have it "all together" all the time. But no human being can have her life "together" all of the time. The faulty belief that her value comes from what she has or doesn't have, from what she does or doesn't do makes it difficult for Our Woman to believe that she can experience joy and pleasure, can be accepted and loved gratuitously. She believes with Sofia that "if I allowed myself to enjoy even small moments of pleasure, I was sure I'd have to pay for them later. Later, the other shoe was sure to drop." or with Ruth who "...always felt if someone gave me

something or did something for me, I had to give something back or do something for them. I had little conception of somebody just doing something nice for me because they wanted to or because they thought I deserved it."

That joy and sorrow, give and take, right and wrong, love and hate can co-exist expresses an essential paradox of being human but Our Woman's experience hides that knowledge from her. In striving for perfection - to be in control all of the time - Our Woman learns cynicism: "I wouldn't ask anyone for help or tell them what was really going on in my life because I didn't think anyone would really do anything for me unless there was something in it for them." Fiona decided that "no one could really be trusted. I thought others were always motivated by some self-serving motive. I relied on myself alone." In cynicism, there is no joy or wonder or awe. Furthermore, cynicism contains within it the ultimate affliction of true spirituality which is a conceit that claims self-sufficiency, the pride that denies all needs. Living this way, Our Women suffered "soul-sickness" (James, 1954; Kaufmann, 1980) and were unable to

> feel attachment to the world and the people around [them] and [to] live as much from the heart as from the head...soul is being cared for when our pleasures feel deeper than usual, when we can let go of the need to be free of complexity and confusion, and when compassion takes the place of distrust and fear...(Moore, 1992, p.304-305).

Rather than dissolving Our Woman's shame, her constant striving for perfection in whatever realm only deepens it. Her false shame allows her to make no distinction between minor misdemeanors and major offenses. A small mistake feels like a giant misdeed. Every trivial transgression or petty fault feels like a moral failure. Sofia observed of herself:

> I kept this horrible secret inside me and didn't deal with it except by always putting on a show on the outside. I made no distinction between person and action. If I did something bad, I *was* bad. If I had a "bad" feeling, I *was* bad.

The root of the word "shame" means "to cover." All human beings need some sort of cover. To be truly human and open, is to risk exposure and possible violation by others. Healthy shame, then, is a way of protecting our development which is a "process of emergence and unfolding" (Karen, 1992, p. 70). But pathogenic shame creates the need for *constant* cover. Perfectionism, born of chronic shame, is a way of seeking cover. It seeks to make Our Woman feel lovable, acceptable or at least indomitable as a way of soothing her shame. What it provides - achievement, recognition, power, perhaps material goods - is external, comes from outside the self. It prevents Our Woman from connecting with her true Self and the true source of her being.

Trapped by Shame

The shame of sexual abuse causes Our Woman to feel insignificant, less than,

demeaned in relation to others and prevents her from the risk-taking that true connection to others requires. Denise "felt lots and lots of shame. It was ingrained in me - no value, no personal value. I was worth *less* and worthless". In shame there is a deep sense of separation and rejection which causes one to withdraw. In her shame, Our Woman fears the loss of esteem of those whom she regards as important. What she does not realize is that the shame she carries is not *her* shame but rather the shame of the abuser. She feels dirty, unclean, unworthy, defiled but, in fact, she has been deeply hurt, wounded. In the abuse itself she suffers violation and helplessness which are made even worse by her shame and its attendant fear of separation from those who should love and support her. She fears being exposed, being found out and found wanting. She feels disconnected. Such feelings left Denise

> cut off from my soul - from life; the life within myself. And it prevented me from connecting with other people and away from God. I was like the ghosts you read about in ghost stories. Ghosts can go through solid walls and other things but they can't *really* connect. The experience of sexual abuse was an experience of hell, of death. Horrific. It was an experience of being pulled apart. Of being broken. Of being disconnected. I was disconnected from my soul and from the outer life as well. I internalized the shame in the "don't tell" - thought I was the guilty one. It cut me off from my *true self* - I couldn't be who I was because I thought who I was, as others put it, was "all fucked up".

Pathogenic shame seems to block creative avenues. It is crippling because it implies that one is at core fundamentally unlovable and unworthy of membership in the human community. It is the self regarding the self with the withering and unforgiving eye of contempt. Living from shame, from a false-self is antithetical to spirituality and spiritual growth. It prevents the self-knowledge which is a necessary ingredient in spirituality - in the search for meaning, connectedness and love. By holding on to the false self, Our Woman is unable to recognize her true Self; is unable to let go of the fear that sustains the false self so that she can reorganize her personality around her true Self. She is caught in a Catch-22. Her shame makes her too embarrassed to engage in honest introspection. The resulting lack of self-awareness and self-knowledge that shame engenders prevents self-acceptance. The first step to knowing herself is to accept herself as she is. It is to let go of the need for "looking good".

Our Woman feels a desperate need to "look good" - to keep up appearances. She fears knowing herself; fears looking inward. To know herself would mean to have to admit she had normal weaknesses, failings and fears like everyone else. Sofia couldn't "let any negative feelings ever surface". She mistakenly believed that such feelings

> weren't acceptable to God or in anyone who wanted to be 'in line' with God...And I came to the point that I absolutely denied that I ever got angry. I got upset. I got frustrated - but never angry. Angry? Me? *I* didn't get angry.

But, as Sofia likewise learned, it also made her unable to accept her positive qualities and strengths.

> I couldn't accept the positive qualities in myself; the good things that happened in my life; the positive emotions I felt. It was too hard to accept all those good things without feeling that the other shoe was going to drop; that something bad would happen or that I'd have to pay for the good things.

Similarly, Ruth's predominant view of herself was

> So negative that I thought it was bragging to admit that I did anything well or that I had any gifts. I wouldn't talk in a group. I was so quiet - a real wall flower - not humble or meek and I mean that in a negative sense, too. What I mean is that I felt I didn't have *anything* to offer.

Shame "owns" Our Woman; it controls the way she treats herself, the messages she gives herself, how she hears the messages of others. When Our Woman inevitably encounters negative responses or criticism from others, it's "easy to let the negative dominate and obliterate the positive" and, as Sofia put it, "to make a mountain out of a molehill." The requirement of shame is that Our Woman be nonexistent; that she hide herself. The acute pain of her shame makes Our Woman want to escape: "I often felt like crawling through a hole and disappearing" ; "Many times I thought if I could only die"; "If I could have just disappeared or faded into the wall paper", "I lost my voice - I was completely silenced; mute; not there".

How Can I Tell You Who I Am?

The sense of being exposed, of being visible but not ready to be visible makes it difficult for Our Woman to establish her identity; to answer the questions "Who am I?" or "Who am I meant to be?" for herself. Shame created such a loss of identity in Denise that she did not even use her own name for much of her life:

> I didn't know who I was or who I was meant to be. Even my name, given to me at birth, was foreign to me. In the Scriptures God says "I have called you by your name". Nobody called *me* by my name. Nobody. They called me 'sis' or 'kid'. I never heard my name.

This persisted into her adult life. She was called "Kid" or "Kiddo" by her husband - a practice she didn't like but didn't feel she had a right to question. Marriage, says Denise, was an attempt at having an identity: "I became part of my husband. That's what marriage meant - that's why I got married." The identity Denise obtained through marriage, however, was not her own. Instead, "I even called myself Mrs. X. Not Denise. Not Denise X. But Mrs. X. I used to even sign my name Mrs. X. I had no positive, separate identity of

my own." What is more, Our Woman's shame makes it difficult for her to do the one thing that would help release her from it. She fears, like Fiona, telling another who she really is because, "if I told [you] who I really am, I fear you won't like me and it's all that I have."

Shame unshared is devastating; it cuts Our Woman off from essential relationships. All of Our Women found it difficult to tell those close to them about their abuse. "I was afraid [my husband] would think of me as damaged goods. After all, that's how I felt about myself", "It took years before I could utter one word about my abuse to anyone. I was always afraid I'd be found out and once found out, thrown aside", "For years I didn't even tell my husband about my abuse. I didn't want him to see me as I truly was with all that ugliness", " I tried not to let anyone- no one - not even *God* - know about my abuse. That was difficult because I knew God could read my thoughts so I tried very hard not to even think about it.", "Whenever I was with other people, I was afraid to let down my guard. My relationships were very superficial. I'm sure that helped put an end to my marriage," "I couldn't tell anyone. I mean it was like - who would have believed it anyway?."

With an image of herself as unworthy and beyond redemption, Our Woman's shame saps her creative powers and kills her joy. It is as if she views the world through a "shame filter". Valerie was aware of this in her life: "I was very solemn, depressed and dreary most of the time. There was absolutely no joy in my life. For a long time I couldn't even imagine that my life could be any other way. I felt hopeless." Denise's world was one in which there were "no colours. I always wore beige. All my clothes were beige. There was no life and no colour...No birds sang. No laughing was allowed. No dancing." Fiona "couldn't have any fun. I didn't think I deserved to take time for myself. I felt that if I wasn't producing something, I had no value."

Our Woman's experience of shame is an experience of oppression, interpreted as a personal fault and therefore deserved. Whatever misfortune or punishment befalls her is deserved.

> I developed a bladder infection and I thought God was punishing me with these terrible, terrible pains. And I wanted God's approval so I didn't say anything about the pains, I just endured them. I didn't know any different then. I thought "this is what I deserve".

The judgement, "I deserve no more than this", is issued over and over and gives credence to shame's twisted logic. "I felt rejected, alone, in pain but somehow the fact that I thought I deserved it made it have some sense.", "I felt there was nothing I could do about my life. It was punishment for being so bad.", "My grandmother called me the evil one...In my mind an evil one deserved no good. So I expected only bad things to happen." When she encounters what she senses to be good, true and beautiful, she either rejects it or sees it as capable of existence only outside herself. " I couldn't accept praise. I would always make light of it. I wouldn't let it penetrate me.", "I thought that happiness or peace was something that other people experienced but not me. It was like a butterfly - I could see it but I could never hope to take hold of it."

What Our Women seek through their efforts to overcome their shame is self-respect and connection to a larger frame of meaning. They are searching for someone to affirm their worth as human beings- as temporal selves, as eternal Selves and as part of something greater.

The Experience of Self and the Experience of God

Our Woman's temptation, then, is to lack of pride and self-assertion, to diffuseness of her personal centre, overdependence on others for self-identity, aimlessness, and fear of acknowledging her own competence. She does not see her female self as God's good gift made in the image of the divine. Hearing that "we are made in the image and likeness of God", is problematic for her on two levels. One of these is the image Our Woman has of God. The other is her image of herself. These are really two faces of the same experience. As we have already seen, Our Woman experiences no positive moral value in her female bodiliness or in her self as a person. This foundational experience of herself leads her to interpret her experience of God in a negative way. Our Woman experiences and articulates herself as object and as bad. This self-naming is a turning away from her true self , a defamation of herself as a female person and a turning away from others, including the divine, as uncaring, untrustworthy and condemning.

Karl Rahner (1978) speaks to the unity of the self and the symbol of God. For Rahner, the human being is fundamentally "spirit in the world", that is, an embodied subject dynamically oriented toward infinite mystery, toward God. When being most personal, human beings reveal an openness toward limitless mystery as the beginning, mainstay and goal of the exercise of their very selves. A person's experience of God is primordially mediated through the changing history of her self. Thus, change in the experience of self will affect the experience of God and vice versa. Self and God are two facets of the same history of experience. "The personal history of the experience of the self is the personal history of the experience of God; the personal history of the experience of God signifies, over and above itself, the personal history of the experience of the self" (p.125). Thus it follows, personal development of the self also creates development of the experience of God; loss of self-identity and/or living from a false identity also brings loss of the experience of God and/or creates a distorted image of God.

Disconnection from God

Our Woman's experience of what it means to trust, to be loved, cared for and nurtured is often at odds with what she has learned formally and informally about God. Sexual abuse is a violation of relationship which affects Our Woman's ability to enter into any relationship including one with God. Fowler proposes that human experience forms a "triadic relationship" among the person, society and God (Fowler in Groome 1980, p.68). What might that triad be like for the three year old who is sexually assaulted by her playmate's uncle? Or the five year-old whose adult brother rapes her? Or the child who is abused from infancy to adolescence by her mother and grandmother? How would these

experiences influence her belief system? What is the triad like for her? The "communion, connection, relational embeddedness, spirituality, affiliations" with which women construct their identity (Josselson 1987, p.191) are often adversely affected by the experience of childhood sexual abuse. It is not surprising then, that finding it difficult to trust others on whom she depended, Our Woman often finds it difficult to trust God also.

Why?

In coming to terms with her abusive experience, Our Woman tries somehow to make sense of what happened to her. She may think that if she can figure out the *why* of the abuse or what circumstances led to it, then perhaps it won't hurt as much. The effort to understand the "why" is one way Our Woman tries to regain some control of her life. In answering the "why", she may, for a time, seek religious explanations that are simplistic and inadequate. Our Women's explanations may lead to God-blame.

> I questioned why God allowed the abuse to happen. I had a hard, hard time with that in fact. It was very confusing how we would go to church all the time and my brother, he'd read the readings in church and my Mom would sing in church and then they'd abuse me. It was very, very confusing to me. I couldn't understand how God would let that happen to small children.
>
> My brother was many years older than me and he was well respected in the church. He was strong on the church and the rules of the church...I didn't see him often because I found him repulsive. What he did to me was repulsive. For a long time, I wondered how could God have allowed him to do what he did to me.
>
> There was a time when I said some pretty nasty things about God - they came out of my anger at God. I blamed God for what had happened to me -for making my father the way he was. I blamed myself and I blamed God.
>
> I figured that the abuse was a punishment from God for being a bad person. I saw God as this authority figure; as someone who is more powerful than me in a negative way - in the sense that he can beat me up.

These statements reveal how Our Women see responsibility for their abuse as belonging to themselves and to God. While offering a limited explanation for the suffering, it removes responsibility from the perpetrator. The story Our Woman tells herself creates a need for relating negatively to her God figure because it enables her to maintain the story she tells herself of being unworthy of healing and love. In her mind, God failed to help her because there is something intrinsically bad about her; something repulsive even to God. Our Woman does not see that the combination of God-blame and self-blame is based on her negative experience and, some might add, erroneous theology.

Asking "Why did this happen to me?", "Where was God when I was being abused?" is one way Our Woman tries to come to terms with herself in relation to God and the universe. The suffering she endured was not of her making; it was not chosen by her in order to accomplish some greater good. Hers is an unjustifiable suffering which should not have happened to her but, until she begins to heal, Our Woman is unaware of this. Asking "Why did God allow this to happen?" is an attempt to instill the abusive experience itself with meaning. Having difficulty believing that her abuse happened for "no good reason" Our Woman tries to create one by seeing what happened to her as "deserved", as a way of "testing" her or as a means to some other end. In this way, Our Woman creates an internal consistency between the view she holds of herself and the view she has of her God figure.

Abandoned by God

In seeking a solution to the dilemma which their sexual abuse created, Our Women sometimes prayed to God. Some, like Valerie, prayed for "something or someone to stop the abuse" and hoped that God would bring about some magical solution to make the idyllic family she imagined into a reality. Ruth, too, would pray

> for the abuse to stop. And I would pray to the baby Jesus for the abuse to stop. But the abuse didn't stop...How could this woman who abused me, tell me to pray and go to church. We'd go to church in the evening and then we'd come home and the abuse would happen that night. That was really, really hard. I just couldn't understand it. It made no sense at all. God made no sense.

Others, like Fiona, begged for deliverance by asking God to "send [the abuser] away" or to "get me out of this terrible place; to anywhere but here." Denise, Fiona and Valerie also prayed for a more direct solution - they prayed for death. "Many times I prayed for death", says Valerie. For Denise, "Death was definitely better than what I was going through". Hyacinth didn't ask for death. She prayed to "be made worthy of God's love". Sofia's prayer centred on "finding a way to clean up the mess of my life; to make me spiritually and morally clean". When life circumstances didn't change or, in some cases, actually got worse, Our Women felt that God was silent. Indeed, Fiona concluded that

> the Great One must be old like my grandpa so therefore he couldn't hear well or see all that good so, I thought, I'm going to have to help him...So I shouted as loud as I could to the Great One "don't you see what people are doing to me? So how come you're not helping me?" And I was just screaming my lungs out.

It wasn't that God actually refused Our Women' requests; God simply did not respond. The conclusion reached by Our Women was that God - and other important figures - had abandoned them. The fear of abandonment is difficult because it is real. Our Woman has experienced it. If there really is a God, that God seems to be hiding. This is poignantly expressed in part of a poem written by Valerie.

Where is my God?
In the darkened years I searched.
Longing for the light and joy.
Unanswered prayers.

Where is my Mother?
Gone like God.
Her laughter, love, strength and gentleness.
The world is different now.

Where is my centre?
Hollow - an aching hole.
Lost, like God, like my Mother.
Hanging on by the thread of life energy.

Where are my hands?
I watch them moving - like foreigners.
Not of me.
Gone sometimes, like God, like my Mother, like my centre.

Our Woman's cry of abandonment reflects her search for meaning in her experience. She concludes that God has abandoned her because she is guilty, dirty, unlovable. Such personal indictments cause Our Woman to withdraw from God because they increase her pain. They create distance between her and God and isolate her from God's love and care and the comfort she so greatly needs. Denise felt that she was "orphaned", "thrown to the wolves"; "left on the shelf" by God. She

> felt abandoned by God but I also felt I was too unworthy and didn't deserve God. I thought "what would he need me for? I'm on my own here." And I was on my own. There were lots of people in my life but none of them was intervening in a way that was helpful or supportive. So I figured "I must survive on my own." In the scripture God had his chosen ones. In my mind, I wasn't one of them.

Hyacinth, too, thought that "God wasn't really there for me. I knew God existed *somewhere* but *I* didn't know where. I knew that because of my unworthiness, God was totally, completely unavailable to me." Ruth prayed to the child Jesus reasoning that "he was a child too and that maybe a child would see another child's pain more easily." But the help for which she prayed was not forthcoming: "Not even my mother was there for me. Nobody would look after me, no one was there to rescue me or to do anything for me. No one was there in an emotional way, not in any consistent way." God did not swoop down to rescue Our Women from their plight and protect them. Neither did anyone else. Sofia's abuse "started when I was *so* young that I had to ask 'where was my mother? Where *was*

she?'" The pain of loss of a hoped-for rescue was sharpened by the felt absence of the One whom Our Women, like Valerie, were told is loving, caring and listening.

> I really thought God had abandoned me. I even remember wondering whether God really existed. Within a week of my Dad's return, I had my first sexual encounter with him and everything was changed. God turned mean and I was wondering where he had gone. Why all of a sudden was he gone?...God seemed to have just taken off. Like it was , pouf!, he was gone."

Images of God

Our Woman's images of God take many forms: God has abandoned her; God is impotent, God is an impossible taskmaster, a "kill-joy", a record keeper who maintains a ledger of her faults and failings. Viewed through Our Woman's eyes, these images of God are understandable. Valerie had learned that "God is my father in heaven" and that her own father was a reflection of God on earth. The only closeness Valerie knew from her father was when he abused her. He also asked Valerie questions about her mother and her mother's sexual behaviour which Valerie neither understood nor could answer. Her inability to respond to her father's questions brought his anger. Valerie could only envision God the Father as emotionally distant and uncaring like her own father. Valerie's mother who had been emotionally available and affectionate to her during her father's four year absence retreated from her when her father returned home. Valerie was five. Her mother did not intervene to help Valerie. She concluded that, when you need God most, God is unavailable. Valerie envisioned

> God as this person, almost like a living person that lived 'out there', 'up there', with a long beard and a long robe. He was remote, distant and he was very powerful...God was at the top - the big authority figure and women and children were at the absolute bottom of the totem pole. That was the morally established order.

The image of God as Father was also fraught with difficulty for Hyacinth:

> God the Father was out in my life...He was the traditional old white bearded father with the big stick 'up there'. He was a judging father and an absent father...God the Father was someone I simply couldn't know.

The image of Jesus was more readily available to Hyacinth in that "he was somebody really there" but not for her. Hyacinth saw herself as "somebody not worthy to know him. I thought you prayed and, if you were lucky, he heard you...But he couldn't hear someone as unworthy as I was."

Valerie recalls being taught the ten commandments by her grandmother when she was about twelve years of age: "I remember saying to her "it says to honour your mother and your father but it doesn't say anything about parents honouring their children". And my

grandmother was *very, very* angry and said, "You don't question what God has written here." Valerie's experience underscores the fact that the commandment to "honour your father and mother..." often presents special difficulty for the child who is abused by a parent. Children are unable on their own to correct their false assumptions and conclusions about their God image. When parents abuse or desert their children, they reinforce negative perceptions the child has of God. The child does not know that the misuse of scriptural teaching is a blatant distortion. She is left to feel that she has no recourse: parental authority is invoked and so is religious authority. Allport (1950, p.35) emphasized that children are unable to integrate contrary messages: "If God is good and God is my father, yet my father is in reality terrifying, threatening or hurtful then...", Allport suggests that the child can conclude either that "God is not my father" or "I am not good." Allport's conclusion is supported by the experience of Our Women.

The Women weren't always sure how they viewed God. Sofia felt an ambiguity about God: "It was almost like there were two Gods in my life." One image might be called the God of knowledge - the God that was described to her by her parents and in her church. That God was a loving, caring God. At the same time, there was the image of God who was a strict and with very high expectations and very clear rules about right and wrong behaviour. This other was the God of her experience. Sofia knew that God as "a very exacting God; a glorified policeman who was always ready to pounce on me...I felt that that God was punishing me - was a punishing God." These concurrent images were a source of conflict and confusion for Sofia: "Even though God was a punishing God, at the same time I felt that if I went through this ritual of asking forgiveness for my sinfulness, you know, that he was forgiving me. So there was a God I could turn to that co-existed with the God who punished me and saw me as bad." Of the two, however, it was the punishing God who was uppermost in Sofia's thoughts. The punishing God "was integral to the story of who I thought I was."

For Ruth there were two main God images also - one "good" and one "bad". "Separating the good God from the bad God" was a challenge to Ruth. She recalled thinking that

> God was supposed to be good but he was also portrayed as bad - if I didn't obey the rules God would punish me for that. I was afraid of God. I was afraid if I didn't go to church bad things would happen to me. And I would be punished for not obeying the rules. The thing that comes to me right now is the first time I had sex with C. - he's my ex-husband - I had a bladder infection shortly after that. And I hadn't separated sexual abuse from sex. I thought they were the same thing. So I really believed that God punishing me for having sex because that was not allowed. "Good girls" didn't do that. My concept of a punishing God kept me from enjoying life. I was always afraid to do something wrong or even to enjoy the day.

The spiritual damage of abuse is compounded by Our Woman's fear that she will not be believed, will be punished and blamed for the abuse and by the feeling of being unable to tell and thus unprotected. A woman in her mid-fifties, Sofia reported feeling very afraid

to tell her mother or any of the women in her religious community about being abused as a young child and adolescent. She was convinced, even as an adult, that she would be blamed for causing trouble. Only "happy and positive feelings" were allowed expression. A "good Christian woman" simply didn't express "anger or other negative emotions". Based on the role-modeling of her parents and the demands of religious life, Sofia came to the conclusion that most of the time God was detached, undiscerning, demanding and punitive. Although she was actively involved in ministry, her concept of God effectively isolated her from the personal relationship with God that she greatly wanted.

Denise saw God as a distant figure who was not involved in the lives of human beings. God was

> this figure sitting in this big chair in the sky. All the little people were on earth. God was way, way out there - removed and disconnected. God was unapproachable. God was this all powerful man that could see all your actions and who condemned you for them. He was always looking at me with his ever-seeing eyes that said, "Don't you ever step out of line or I'll damn you."

As she got older, Denise tried to escape God's condemning gaze by severing all ties:

> I didn't want anything to do with God. I didn't want to say the word 'God' and I didn't want to hear the word 'God'. If there was a preacher on TV or the radio, I'd turn it off right away. I could not bear to even hear the name 'God'. The name 'God' was not heard in my house. If I had even the *thought* of God I would banish that thought: "Don't dare mention that name to me!" I figured that if I denied God or God's existence, then I could survive because then he wouldn't be watching me. He couldn't see what I was doing.

The image of a Jesus who was her "brother" did not provide Denise with the comfort promised either. "I cringed when they talked about Jesus as our brother. My brother had repeatedly abused me. I didn't want Jesus as a brother." Also, the fact that Jesus was male presented difficulty for Denise who, for several years, "didn't want to go to communion because Jesus was male. I didn't want him inside of me."

Another image of God which Our Women found hard to apply to their lives is God as one who loves all people unconditionally. The child usually learns unconditional love from her parents who initially provide all that she needs. However, when the child grows up in a family where she is abused, the characteristic of unconditional love seems foreign. Ruth's God image didn't allow for unconditional love. Her God loved "good girls". In Ruth's mind, she was not a "good girl" and thus, she was outside the realm of God's love. Even as an adult, Ruth decided that she could not maintain her membership in the church because she was not living up to its rules and expectations. Failing them, Ruth saw herself as someone who failed to meet the conditions set out for those whom God loves. Denise, too, felt that she was barred from God's love because she felt responsible for her abuse. Denise's father had laid the responsibility on her, telling her, "'You better pray to God to

forgive you. You're gonna go to hell.' In my mind, sexuality and hell were a package. Where there was sex, there was no God." Hyacinth stayed in her church and continued to be a regular church-goer though she knew herself to be a "sinner and wholly undeserving of God's love." She hoped that by keeping the commandments and the rules of the church "perfectly", she would meet God's conditions sufficiently well that she could "earn" God's love. Valerie remembers that "God was all-loving as long as you did *exactly* as he said which was what was in the Bible. The other side - if you *didn't* do what God said - that was a different story. I had a real fear of God." The image of God as all-loving and all-knowing perplexed Valerie for a long time. She recalled how as a child she concluded that

> if God knows all, then somehow everything that happens to us is because God wanted it to happen. And then some people would say that whatever happens is God's will. Well, to my little girl ears that sounded like God wanted the abuse to happen. How could God love me and also want this to happen to me?

In the Christian tradition, human beings are urged to "Love God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength and to love your neighbour as yourself." Clearly, for Our Women loving themselves or God was not easy . Loving others proved almost as problematic.

Disconnection from Others

All human beings have a desire and need for human closeness. In Our Women, this need and desire co-existed with and was often overshadowed by a fear of closeness. Trusting another, drawing near, places anyone at some risk, to be sure. As children, most of us learn that the comfort of closeness is generally worth the risks we take and as we grow older we continue to learn to balance distance and intimacy. The experience of sexual abuse, however, can cause one to interpret all closeness as threat. Affection can rekindle the mixed feelings that betrayal by the trusted individual created. Closeness can heighten the fear of one's own lack of worthiness and of being "found out". Sofia feared closeness because "I felt that I always had these horrible secrets that I felt if people knew, they'd reject me. There was this fear of letting anybody know for fear of their rejection. I was afraid to risk letting anyone know about my life." Other Survivor Women reiterated this concern and spoke of "hiding inside myself"; "protecting myself from others"; "not letting people see who I am" or "how I really am". One of their almost incessant questions was voiced most succinctly by Denise: "I constantly wondered: How can I keep from exposing the real me?"

When the "real me" is thought to be bad, worthless, damaged, different, unworthy, unlovable, it is little wonder that risking relationship with others is a fearful prospect. The fear of disclosure was most keen in those relationships that we generally tend to think of as "close relationships" - marriage, family, friendship - places "where the wounding love relationships of our past are most deeply felt. Those childhood wounds to the soul make it extremely difficult...for one to experience an intimate and creatively evolving human

connection" (Abrams, 1990, p. 4). Hyacinth knew this. She talked about being married many years to a "very loving and patient man"; still, she could not allow herself to tell him the source of her hesitancy when having sexual relations with him. "I just couldn't bring myself to tell him [about the abuse] for a long, long time", she says. Though she felt their marriage was a "good one" and she was "happy in it", Hyacinth's inability to tell her husband about the abuse and the effect she believed it had on her life felt like she was holding back a big part of herself from him. Not being able to "let him know who [she] really was" imposed "a great burden" on her. She described it as a "chain that prevented the door from being fully opened. And as much as I wanted to have no secrets between us, I could not break silence on my abuse because I was so full of shame about it even before him." For Hyacinth, intimacy even in her most cherished relationship was hampered; she would not allow herself the risk of being known "warts and all."

Denise also described this dynamic at work in her marriage which she described as "distant and cold. It was not a relationship of equals. He was the master and I was the kid. And that's what he always called me, "Kid", and that's how I felt. I didn't see myself as his equal; with my own ideas or with my own choices to make." Not surprisingly, there was distance in their sexual relationship. Denise did not enjoy sex and "found it difficult to become sexually aroused, to be a willing participant but I also felt I had a duty as [his] wife to be sexually available. Sex just became more and more frustrating." Strain was also experienced in their working relationship where no "real closeness or intimacy were ever achieved". Over time, Denise believed that the emotional distance between herself and her husband had cemented a very close relationship between her husband and her daughter. In retrospect, it was not the sort of closeness that Denise considered healthy.

> My husband used our daughter to meet his emotional needs...Every time my daughter came around, my husband would dump me and would start to talk to her about things. He would discuss things with her before he'd ever discuss them with me. And one day I blew up and accused him: "You're in love with our daughter". He didn't take kindly to that and thought I was accusing him of having a sexual relationship with her which I wasn't at the time but he took it that way. Then I couldn't handle that because I didn't know for sure how far their relationship had *really* gone. It was a major crisis...There was a triangle between me, my daughter and my husband.

After the confrontation with her husband, the relationship between Denise and her daughter also grew more strained: "We weren't talking very much and when we did, it was with angry words...And I was angry at her because she had gone to the priest about me pushing religion on her. And the priest called me about it... I was *really* angry at her for talking to him...Also, there were secrets between us. I hadn't told her about my abuse even though she was old enough to hear about it..." Her daughter's interactions with others also worried Denise:

> [My daughter] was taking men *much* older than herself for her boyfriends. Or she had long-distance relationships or ones with guys who were on their death beds or

something. It was very hard for her to let go of Dad and let him be a *Dad.* She felt isolated and abandoned. And I felt it was because I had not been a wife, a confidant, a friend to my husband.

Distance from others characterized all Denise's relationships. As she put it, " I related to people at a superficial level for much of my life. I did not reveal what I *really* thought about anything for fear they would think I was wrong". As for feelings, Denise says that they "were things I denied even to myself. I didn't know what I felt so I couldn't share my feelings with others even if I had wanted to". Denise felt that men saw her as "one of the boys" because "that's how I acted; how I wanted them to see me." She did not want to risk being "feminine because I equated that with being weak and overpowered."

Closeness had originally characterized Valerie's relationships - especially her relationship with her mother. For Valerie's first five years of life, her "mother gave me a lot of love. But it stopped." After Valerie's father returned home and his abuse of her had begun, things radically changed in Valerie's life. A gap grew between not only Valerie and her father but also between her and her mother.

My mother totally changed. And everything was very confusing to me. I remember my mother drinking really heavily and I can *never* remember my mother drinking before then so everything got really mixed up. Things were really changed and I didn't know what was happening...She became a very withdrawn person and eventually she became housebound. And I felt very abandoned by her and was very angry with her.

As the abuse continued, Valerie felt her mother withdraw more and more from her and another change took place which would remain characteristic of their association:

In many, many situations roles were completely reversed. I thought I had to nurture my mother. It was like I took the abuse; she went and hid and I had to come in and, because she was crying and upset, I felt I had to take care of her. And I kept taking care of her...In her later life, she had agoraphobia and couldn't go out of the house alone at all so I had to pick her up to take her to do things.

From age five, Valerie's experience of her mother was one of helplessness, depression and dependency. Valerie wanted desperately to connect not only with her mother but also with her father so, despite the personal costs of her father's abuse and her mother's lack of care, Valerie continued to look after them right up until they died. What she wanted in return was, on the one hand, very small; on the other, more than they could give:

All it would have taken was for my mother to say before she died, "I'm really sorry. I should have protected you." That's all she would have needed to say to me was that she was sorry and she wishes she could change it. And that's all it would have taken. And that's probably all it would have taken for my Dad, too. If he had said "I'm sorry for what I did to you. I know it was wrong..."

But her mother's apology was not forthcoming and, with her mother's death, the realization that it never would, released Valerie to admit how angry she still felt toward her mother. But Valerie could not admit anger against her father until she learned that he was abusing her niece. At that time she recalls saying to her husband, "That's the last straw. I'm not going to see him anymore." Despite the fact that the hoped for death bed reconciliation with her mother did not come to pass, Valerie still played out the scene in her mind of an eleventh hour apology from her father. When he was dying, Valerie

> decided that I was going to see him. It was for a selfish reason. I *wanted* an apology. I didn't get one. But something really struck me about him in the hospital bed with just a sheet over him - I was amazed at how *small* he was. He was *really* a small man. And I thought, "Why have I been *so* afraid of him?". Even when I went to take him for groceries, [my husband] had to come with me because I was so afraid of him. I never felt good about being in the same room with him. And then, when I saw him in that hospital bed, he was *so small.* It was amazing!

Valerie saw the effects of the abuse in other relationships, too. For many years, she suffered depression which prevented her from being the kind of mother she believes she might otherwise have been to her children.

> I was a very different Mom. I wasn't your stay-at-home-cookie-making Mom. A lot of time I was in hospital and when I wasn't, I was busy reading and searching and, you know - and this sounds terrible - there were times when I almost resented that I couldn't do what I wanted to do. It was a trapped feeling...I believe my children looked at me and saw a lot of flaws in the way I mothered them...I know it was hard; it was hard for them. I know I wasn't a "bad' mother but there was always this picture of what a mother should be and what women should be doing and I didn't fit the image.

Valerie's long-standing depression and the years of emotional distance it engendered between her and her children made it difficult for them to talk to one another, to share their feelings, hopes and dreams in a deep and meaningful way. Valerie believes that some of her difficulty in working things out between herself and her children reflected her still ambiguous and unresolved feelings toward her own mother and the fact that she had not forgiven her mother for her inadequacies. Valerie's dilemma is poignantly expressed by Paola, the central character in a story by Mary Gordon (1993) who

> wonders if there will come a moment, even one, before she dies, in which she will be able to forgive her. That would mean something she almost wants. But not entirely. Forgiveness would mean giving up that grain of sand, that dark irritation around which she formed her idea of who she was. *I am not her.* (p.218).

Valerie also observed that in her need to work things out with her own mother, that she looked for "a new mother" as a way of saying: "I don't have to do this work. I can find this in someone else." The someone else in her case was her husband of whom Valerie says, "He had to be mother, father, friend - everything for a lot of years." He was "a substitute mother" to fill the gaps and to take care of Valerie since that was easier for her than "finding ways to nurture and nourish myself...I didn't have to be responsible for my life."

Sofia made a similar discovery. Looking back at her decision to enter religious life at the tender age of sixteen, Sofia realizes that it was fostered by mixed motivations. The sincere desire to "answer the call of Jesus" was one. An equally compelling one, perhaps not so consciously chosen, was the desire to run away to a place that she perceived as safe - safe from having to deal with men, from having to confront her own sexuality and from having to be responsible for her own decisions:

> It would have been much more healthy for me to have dealt with the sexual abuse before that and to have experienced good, warm relationships with those of the opposite sex before just kind of running away to the convent especially at such a young age...I hadn't had the opportunity to mature and so the whole sexuality aspect was just pushed aside. Looking back on it now, I think that I was really running away.

The structure of religious life, where obedience to authority took precedence over personal decision-making, kept Sofia from having to really grow up.

> The type of training I received was very maternalistic - it kept me in a real way as a child. It didn't help me to grow up. Basically, it was a continuation of my home life and, to me, there were no big issues for me to deal with on my own...I didn't know how to distinguish between important and unimportant things, between the essential and the peripheral. For me, it was a package deal - everything was important. The bigger reality was that I did what I was told; stopped thinking for myself or examining what I wanted for myself. Basically, in all my relationships, I acted like a child. I just followed.

Sofia concluded that her discomfort with peer relationships and her lack of maturity pushed her into teaching children where she could feel less threatened and exposed. Emotionally, children were her peers. She noted that, for much of her adult life, she " had a fear of working with adults" and, thus, had not risked forming close relationships with them. Neither was her relationship with her mother a close one. "I did not have an intimate relationship with her...had not developed a close relationship with her...I needed some understanding and some help and I didn't get that or, at least, I didn't remember that...I was angry with my mother and I put a lot of blame on her."

For much of her life, Ruth related to others primarily in the capacity of "people pleaser". She didn't like conflict of any kind especially if it brought another's anger. The only memory that Ruth could attach to touching or holding was in the context of sexual

abuse. She attributes the tendency she once had "to allow others to make me an object" to her abusive experience. Her relationships with others were premised on that experience. Trusting others and being open to them was difficult:

> I put my life on hold in the sense that I saw myself as somehow incomplete because of the sexual abuse. I was incomplete in the sense that I was shut down; I was not fully opened to others- I was a very closed person...I was also on guard all the time - always aware of what was going on at one level but being separated from it at the feeling level...I was afraid to express my feelings to others and didn't feel safe about it - I feared expressing feelings because I was afraid of being violated; I was afraid that it was not going to be okay; I would be squelched somehow. I was not able to trust; I was not able to be intimate with people because I was too afraid of being hurt. I wanted very much to be intimate but I didn't know how.

Ruth's association with her mother was very ambiguous. On the one hand, Ruth attributed her great love of and respect for the natural world to her mother. On the other, she had great fear of and confusion about her mother whose affection always came at a price. Ruth was "terribly afraid of my mother; of making her angry; of her being upset with me. And I did a lot of things even as an adult just so my mother wouldn't be mad with me." As Ruth learned to come to terms with the abuse she experienced at the hands of her mother, she found it difficult to "let [her] mother go...I know I'm an adult now and I know my mother isn't here. They're just memories of her but they are very powerful memories."

Learning to live with the ambiguity she felt toward her mother and also toward her brother and not transfer it to other relationships was something that Ruth had to learn: "I had to discover how to meet people where they were and not automatically mistrust their intentions." She also learned "to be cautious about not being re-abused...Because nurturing turned into abuse, I got the two confused. I held myself back from others." For many years, Ruth kept her distance by "looking after other people's needs and not my own. My own needs weren't even considered, let alone met, and I was very unhappy but then I couldn't figure out why I was so unhappy." Ruth came to realize later that, she had no real connection with anyone. The relationships were one-sided. "I didn't allow others to give to me; I wouldn't ask for help. I didn't realize that in good relationships, there's give and take on both sides."

Conclusion

The spiritual effects of Our Woman's abuse continued long after the actual abuse ended. The abusive events left Our Woman out of touch with the lived body, that is, the body as it is *felt.* Abstracting herself from her body, she came to view it as object and was unable to fully express her true sexuality "as part of a full embrace of our embodied condition" (Feuerstein, 1993, P.16). Denial, distrust, hatred or rejection of the body was also denial, distrust, hatred and rejection of her way of being in the world. To be exiled from her body was to be without a sense of belonging. Estranged from her deeper self, she

was unable to define a clear sense of self or to be at home within herself. The God of her experience may have seemed real but distant, remote, punishing. Feeling abandoned by those closest to her, she felt God had abandoned her too. The fear of being left completely alone to face her suffering reached to her depths and challenged her faith and weakened her trust. Her distrust of others and her fear of betrayal kept her distant from others and fearful of revealing herself to anyone. She became a disconnected observer rather than an active participant in life. Capable of performing her appointed tasks, she was not truly present in the acts. Or being threatened by her body, she identified with what she called her spirit and retreated into her mind. Either way, she suffered a diminution of her being.

For Our Woman, the experience of sexual abuse was one that changed her way of being in the world. The change is one that shaped her spirituality in a negative direction - it impeded her spiritual growth. In examining the impact of sexual abuse upon their spirituality, Our Women also alluded to other influences that deepened their sense of disconnection and which exacerbated the negative effects of their abuse. These influences, which sometimes overlap, form the study's second theme which will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Deepening the Disconnection: Hindrances to Healing

> Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet. (James, 1902/1958, p.121)

Introduction

In their reflection upon how sexual abuse affected their spirituality, Our Women noted that the experience of sexual abuse alone did not impede their spiritual development. Their childhood sexual abuse was not a discrete piece of their lives but happened in the context of their wider life experience. The experience of sexual abuse was, however, a key experience in its own right which shaped Our Women's view of the world and the way in which other events were interpreted or the power they had to influence their lives. Each Woman was able to identify specific factors that became linked to the abusive experience and deepened the sense of disconnection that resulted from her experience of childhood abuse. These factors varied somewhat from one Woman to another and included such things as teachings about guilt or the way others responded to disclosures of childhood sexual abuse. Viewed through Our Women's experiences of sexual abuse, particular teachings, experiences or beliefs (which had negative impact on their own) were brought into sharper focus. They took on greater significance in the wake of the experience of abuse and compounded its negative spiritual effects. A brief exploration of some of these contributing factors which Our Women identified follows next.

Guilt

Among Our Women, guilt was a common reaction to the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Our Women's guilt feelings were often diffuse. They spoke of feeling guilty about the abuse itself, guilty about their eventual disclosure of the abuse, guilty for delaying the disclosure and guilty about the disruptions in their own family or in their family of origin when they finally disclosed the abuse. These feelings of guilt, due in large part to the nature of the abuse itself, were difficult in themselves for Our Women to deal with. What is of particular interest here, however, is something more. Our Women alluded to certain religious teachings or attitudes which exacerbated their guilt and slowed the process of healing.

Some of Our Women had a persistent confusion about the difference between sexual abuse and sexual activity. This created difficulty because Our Women had been taught that all sex outside marriage is sinful. They then tended to see the sexual abuse not as an activity imposed on them by someone else but as their own sexual misconduct and sinfulness for which they believed themselves responsible. Sofia's thinking illustrates this confusion well:

> In my mind, there were no distinctions between what I did willingly and what I did because I was forced to do it. To me they were the same. I didn't know there was such a thing as sexual abuse and that I was not responsible for it. Sexual abuse to me was the same as any other sexual activity. I felt a great deal of guilt over the abuse because I didn't know the difference.

Ruth expresses a similar difficulty. She had been taught that "good girls" do not have sex outside marriage. As a young person, she did not make the distinction between sexual abuse and normal sexual activity and concluded that the abuse placed her outside the realm of the "good girls" and made her guilty of sin. Her sense of guilt was so strong that, even after she married, she could not accept the rightness of her sexual actions and let go of the guilt she felt whenever she was engaged in them. For her, even marriage could make sex "only a bit right."

Denise learned negative attitudes toward sexuality early in life from her father. He was described as "very religious with strict rules regarding sexual behaviour" - or at least the sexual behaviour of females. In response to discovering five-year old Denise and her four and six-year old brothers involved in playing "doctor", Denise's father put her "in the corner for hours" shouting loudly at her, "Cover your legs. You better pray to God to forgive you. You're gonna go to hell for this." The fact that Denise's brothers were not reprimanded in any way led Denise to conclude that she was somehow responsible for not only her own "wrong behaviour" but for her brothers' also. Similarly, Denise concluded that she was also responsible for the sexually abusive actions of her adult brother and her uncle since, in her father's way of seeing things she was a" daughter of Eve." Denise was responsible for her own sexual abuse by virtue of being female. She, like Eve, was the temptress who enticed the males into sin. She concluded that:

> Sex was sin - big sin - awful stuff. As a child I had learned you could live your whole life and be really, really good but then you could blow it and you'd go to hell by committing a big sin. For me big sin was always connected to sex. Big sin damned you. Sex damned you. For me the abuse was about sex so it was about sin - my sin. I thought of myself as having commit a terrible sin and believed God was going to punish me. I was going to hell for sure.

Denise was not the only one to whom the idea of females being responsible for the sexual conduct of males was espoused. Sofia could "remember actually being told that females were responsible for all sexual behaviour - if you got into trouble or if anything sexual happened - you were responsible. It's as if they were saying boys don't have any control so the girls have to take responsibility for anything sexual." Assuming responsibility for her own sexual abuse was an easy step within such a logic for Our Women. So was exonerating the offender by conclusions such as Denise reached about her adult brother: "For a long time I figured he wasn't responsible for what he did." When she learned many years after the fact that her brother had spent a year or more in a

psychiatric hospital, it confirmed her guilt. "I was sure then that I had to have been responsible. How could he be responsible? He was crazy."

For Hyacinth and Sofia, both Catholics, guilt was compounded by their understanding of confession which placed them squarely on the horns of a dilemma which Hyacinth explained:

> For confession to be effective, it was necessary to confess one's sins. And I thought that the sexual abuse made me guilty of sin. Well, there was no way I could bring myself to tell the priest about that. And, to boot, the confessor, like my abuser, was always a man which didn't make things any easier. So here I had compounded my sinfulness by not telling the priest about it - by not confessing it. This was a big issue for me. The child that I was took on the misunderstanding that I was guilty. And then I had guilt heaped upon guilt because I believed I was making a bad confession by not telling the sin. I felt that my "bad confession" was a condemnation whereas, really, it was my inability to open up about something which was so shameful to me that burdened me so much. But I didn't know that then.

Sofia recalled how, as a teen, reading "the little booklets for confession" added to her dilemma. In the booklets "anything with regard to the sixth commandment -thou shalt not commit adultery - was *pages* long and it was all in *bold type* which meant that it was all serious sin." The disproportionate emphasis on the sixth commandment combined with Sofia's interpretation of what she read convinced her that her abuse made her guilty of sin. Her natural adolescent sexual curiosity and feelings and her difficulties with masturbation were interpreted as further proof of her sinfulness. She felt obligated to atone for her perceived wrongdoing. "From ages 13 to 16, [she] really tried to clean up [her] life - to make up for what I thought was my sin" by going to church daily and praying regularly and by doing things to show that she was a "good girl". Despite her outward appearance of goodness, Sofia "believed deep down that I was not a good person. In a way, doing all the right things made my guilt worse. I felt that my good behaviour was only a surface appearance of goodness with which I was able to fool other people but not myself."

Confession proved a burden to both Hyacinth and Sofia for different reasons. Hyacinth's difficulty resulted from her inability to confess her "sin". Sofia, although she "confessed" several times found her guilt was not resolved by confession:

> ...confession was of no help at all. In fact, it was a burden because every time I went, I had the abuse with me. Confessing alone didn't help me. It didn't help me feel good about myself and it didn't help me feel good about God. What I remember is that I always left feeling that I had not been forgiven - the priest didn't understand me and God didn't forgive me.

Forgiveness

Our Women had difficulty coming to terms with forgiveness and reconciliation. Pressure from within was created in them by teachings which stressed the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Pressure from without came from the questions posed by mothers, siblings, spouses, friends: "Have you forgiven her?" or "Do you think you'll ever forgive him?" When Our Woman's answer was "No" or "not yet", she was often reminded of the dictum to "turn the other cheek" or "to err is human, to forgive divine." Also, in urging forgiveness upon Our Women, different people seemed to mean different things thus further confusing the issue for them.

Some of Our Women were urged to forgiveness in the form of "forgetting" about the abuse; returning it to the emotional archives where it had been stored for so many years. This was the case for Denise. When she finally told her husband about the abuse, he provided questions rather than understanding: "He said to me 'Why don't you just leave it? Why do you want to bring all that up now? Why can't you just forget about it?" Denise also discovered that people she considered friends were unwilling to "simply listen" to her and allow her to grieve the losses she felt as a result of her abuse. "They just wanted me to forgive and forget; to act as if nothing had really happened. 'After all', they'd say 'it was so many years ago. Why bring it up now'?" Denise asked herself if she were capable of a forgiveness that was equated with simply putting what happened to her out of her mind. She also wondered if such a definition fulfilled the mandate of "true forgiveness" which she believed was "expected of [her] as a Christian."

For others, forgiveness meant that Our Woman should admit that somehow the abuse was not really an issue or an offense. In Hyacinth's experience "...forgiveness was thrown out as an expectation without any consideration of the impact of the abuse on the victim. Few people wanted to admit that sexual abuse really happened or, if it did, it wasn't considered serious or all sorts of excuses were made for why it happened. None of the excuses put the blame on the offender where it belonged."

Hyacinth believed herself a sinner because of her abuse. She believed she was not in the realm of God's love. She found the idea of forgiveness difficult to grasp. The preaching of forgiveness which she heard in church did not help her understanding nor did it alleviate her guilt. "It's great to preach forgiveness to people but not without any explanation of what the full requirements of forgiveness are. The officials of the church made it sound like forgiveness was easy. It wasn't." Sofia also noted that "the church had not provided us with ways to work toward forgiveness. Little, if any, instruction or guidance was provided to help people deal with their feelings of shame or anger or guilt."

Fiona doesn't recall anyone directly telling her to forgive. But she "kept recalling what I'd been taught - that the Great One always forgives. I felt that I had to forgive, too. So I tried to forgive. It wasn't easy. In fact, I'm still working on that one." Denise heard a similar voice: "In church I heard that we ought to forgive others because God forgives us. In my mind I kept thinking if God forgives my brother and my uncle, then I should, too. But I couldn't forgive and I felt guilty for not forgiving. Also, I didn't feel that God had forgiven me."

Our Women experienced frustration when forgiving the offender was the concern of others rather than their own. Pressuring Our Woman to forgive, says Denise "is a way for others to deal with their own emotional discomfort. They aren't able to handle the survivor's pain or they can't handle their own. So they push forgiveness." But, as Ruth discovered, forgiveness cannot be rushed or made to happen on command. She came to realize that her

> forgiveness was given too soon because I wanted to do what good Christians do and good Christian people forgive. I sometimes tried to get to the stuff of forgiveness before I had worked out the issues that needed to be worked out. I tended to rush forgiveness because in my mind I thought that's what I should be doing. I was following some rule that said "you should be forgiving" instead of letting it proceed at a more natural level. I used to think that if something's the rule then I had to follow it. I followed the rule on forgiveness thinking that eventually the forgiveness would come at a different level. Now I realize it's not just a matter of saying "I forgive" or even "I must forgive." And I'm still having to work on not rushing to follow the rule.

Hurrying forgiveness intensifies guilt and thwarts the process of healing. Sofia's lack of readiness to forgive led her to further self-recrimination:

> I thought I could forgive by simply making up my mind to put the past behind me. But it wasn't that simple. It wasn't enough to "turn the other cheek." I hadn't yet told anyone about the abuse so there was no sense of justice having been done. The abuse happened when I was still a child. I thought I should be past it; that everything should be okay now. But everything wasn't okay. I was still hanging on to the pain and the anger. I felt badly that I wasn't able to let that go. Instead of just accepting that that's where I was, I blamed myself even more.

Valerie made her forgiveness contingent on the offender's repentance which she hoped would come in the form of an apology. She required only that he would say "I'm sorry for what I did to you. I know it was wrong..." What Valerie wanted was some concrete expression of the harm done to her, acknowledgement that it should not have happened and responsibility to be placed with the offender, her father. This is probably what all survivors of sexual abuse would like. Ideally, the offender's repentance would have provided justice and freed Our Woman to forgive. But, as Valerie painfully discovered, the offender's repentance can never be assured. Without the repentance of the offender and the forgiveness of the survivor, a new relationship with him seems almost impossible. Our Woman found she had to find the needed experience of justice, of right relationship, through others.

Our Women asked themselves, "If the offender's repentance is not forthcoming, is forgiveness possible?" Their question reveals the confusion between forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation is what all Our Women wanted at one time or another. They tried various ways to heal the broken relationship between themselves and their offenders -

mother, father, grandmother, uncle, brother, trusted friend. Their loss of relationship with trusted loved ones was very difficult. When the possibility of reconciliation was taken away forever by the offender's death, their question was brought back into sharp relief. "Forgiveness was very hard for me", said Denise. She asked herself:

> What does it mean to forgive? Who am I forgiving? For whose benefit am I forgiving? It wasn't for my brother's benefit. He was dead now. With no way to physically reconnect with him, was there no way to heal the rift? Without forgiving him, no forgiveness was happening. I was also finding it hard to forgive myself.

Our Women's forgiveness of self and forgiveness of the offender were interconnected. Both required a "letting go" of the past - a refusal to let it have power in the present. Our Women's reluctance to admit to themselves that something was fundamentally wrong with their lives blocked their ability to forgive themselves for their human limitations, their capacity to be hurtful to themselves and others, their vulnerability to others, especially those who had abused them, their need for and dependence on others, their anger. There were many things to forgive in themselves. Denise found it hard to forgive herself for her "rejection of life" which was enacted through frequent thoughts of and occasional attempts at suicide. She also reproached herself for her harsh judgement of her own and others' "failure to live up to the rules." Sofia's lack of self-forgiveness brought a concomitant self-blame. It also brought judgement and blame almost exclusively upon her mother for the poor relationship Sofia had with her. Valerie and Ruth spoke of "beating myself up" for not being perfect, for making mistakes, for simply being human. Hyacinth could not forgive herself for her failure to measure up; for "not being good enough". She was caught in an unending struggle to make herself "worthy of God's love and salvation." In retrospect, Our Women realized that their misunderstanding of forgiveness impeded their spiritual growth by locking them into condemnation of and alienation from self, others and God.

Anger

Anger is considered a healthy response to victimization. Yet, for many survivors of childhood sexual abuse, it is often unacknowledged or repressed. Sometimes the strength of their anger made Our Women fearful of its expression. Sometimes it was the fear that others, if confronted by Our Woman's anger, might abandon her. A third difficulty was a Christian emphasis on the sinfulness of anger or its inappropriateness for women (Fortune and Hertze, 1991; Noddings, 1989; Schneiders, 1983; Servaty, 1991). Sofia's Christian upbringing made her reluctant to acknowledge or express anger. For her, anger was to be avoided as a sinful emotion. It was "not an emotion that 'good' girls displayed. So, what was I to do with my anger when it came up? I pushed it down. Eventually, I couldn't even admit to myself that I got angry. A good Christian woman just wouldn't get angry and I wanted to be good."

The Women's socialization as children and, as females, also contributed to their difficulty with anger. Until quite recently, women and children were not seen as possessing the ability to know their own wills- they were not encouraged to agency. Rather, they were urged to foster those virtues that increase their vulnerability to abuse - submission, unquestioning obedience to authority, timidity, silence, submersion of personal identity, self-hatred (Schneiders, 1983, Noddings, 1989; Fortune and Hertze, 1991). Valerie learned from her grandmother that anger did not fit with such virtues. She was taught unquestioning obedience. "To question anything was wrong. To question anything that had religious authority was an even greater wrong." When Valerie angrily declared that she didn't honour her mother and father, her grandmother denounced that anger as "against what God has said." Valerie wondered why her anger was so vehemently denounced while her father's abuse was not. She concluded that her "anger was a worse offense against God" than was her father's abuse.

Denise feared that having and expressing anger would bring God's retribution. "I thought that anger was wrong and I really expected that if I expressed my anger, I would be in big trouble. Although I felt really angry, I would never admit it. But I think that keeping it so tightly under control contributed to the terrible eczema I had on my body." In therapy she gradually replaced the misinformation she had about anger and began to see it as an acceptable emotion. Her first overt expressions of anger, however, were both undirected and misdirected. As Denise puts it:

> I was a rage-aholic. At first I raged at every little thing. I would rage at my husband for touching me and he didn't understand that...And I raged at my children and my family - my brothers and sisters. I woke the sleeping lion and he'd been asleep for a long time. When he finally woke up, he was pretty savage. For a time, the anger became the centre of my life.

Denise realized, however, that to keep her anger from draining all of her energy, she would need to channel it and to find expressions for it that weren't damaging to herself and others. "Before I had felt guilty about my anger. Now I was feeling guilty about the way I expressed it." Her anger became a powerful force for positive change only when she learned to direct it and to express it in appropriate ways. Along the way, Denise "ended up having to do a lot of apologizing to a lot of people."

Teachings about God

Children are taught certain things about the nature of God at a very early age. Some of these things undoubtedly prove to be helpful and assist later development. Others, however, are confusing and lead to distortion. Denise's father used an image of God as a stern judge and taskmaster as a way of instilling discipline and control in his daughter. Denise's resultant fear of God prevented her from an appreciation of God's love and forgiveness. Hyacinth's fear of God's condemnation was also fueled by the "hell fire and brimstone talks [she] received in [her] strict Irish Catholic upbringing." Although Valerie's

grandmother spoke about God's goodness and love, she also taught Valerie that God's "dark side was always present. God was loving as long as you were good and did what the Bible said. If you didn't, it was an entirely different story. God's wrath was more present than God's love. It was God's wrath that kept me in line." The primary image of God operative in Sofia's life was that of "glorified policeman. God was someone who was always on the lookout for bad behaviour." She had learned that God was a judge who kept account of human misdeeds. For Ruth, the image of God as powerful was associated with dominance and submission issues. She felt that

> God could beat me up...I learned that if I didn't go to church, God would punish me. If I did something I wasn't supposed to do, God would punish me. I also learned that I should rely on God. God was supposed to protect me. He didn't. Always there was the good God and the bad God. I couldn't figure it out.

The manifest or overt images of God are ones that we most easily attend to. In Christianity the overt images of God have been presented in predominantly male terms. When people are asked about God, their first response, whether they are "religious" or not, is "male" (Schaef, 1985, p. 163). Male metaphors for God are not problematic in themselves. As Johnson (1992) aptly put it: "men are made in the image of God and may suitably serve as finite beginning points of reference to God" (p. 33). It is the exclusion of all other images, even though scripture and tradition contain them, that created an obstacle for some of Our Women..

The prevailing focus on male divinity exerted a negative influence upon Valerie's spirituality and self-identity. Valerie

> had the sense that women weren't really quite made in God's image and that we were not quite up to par. Feeling this way about myself affected what I expected from life - and especially from a husband...He would *complete* me. I didn't see myself as being a whole person in my own right.

The sense of fragmentation that resulted from her experience of abuse was compounded by the false belief that she, as female, could not achieve wholeness.

The "primarily male images of God found in many major religions" were ones that Denise found discomforting. Schneiders (1986) helps elucidate why this might be so. "Metaphors for God drawn from human experience can easily be literalized. While we are immediately aware that the personal God is not really a rock or a mother eagle, it is easy enough to imagine that God is really a king or a father" (p. 57). It is not only the overt God-image that is problematic but also the qualities of image that form unconsciously. Known only as hints or feelings when a child tries to pray to or think about God, these qualities have strong influence on later experience. Even when the overt God-images mature and become more sophisticated, these underlying qualities may remain constant and active. Images of God as "father" or "male" conveyed through words are symbolically

connected to and affected by the child's experience of father and other males. The effect of this connection is seen in Denise:

> All the images I had of God until quite recently were male images. No one ever spoke of God as mother or wisdom or friend or lover or any of the other images that I've been learning about. Male images are images of power. As far as I could tell only males had any power. God was at the top, then Jesus, then the apostles - all men- and so on down it went. In the family, it was the same thing. The husbands and fathers were at the top. Women and children had no power. They had to obey the husbands and fathers. Wives were supposed to be subject to their husbands. Even Eve did not have her own separate creation. She was from Adam, part of him. Without him, she would have had no existence.

For much of her married life, Denise felt that way about herself in relation to her husband. She thought that

> marrying him would complete me. My husband believed that too. He believed he owned me and I believed he did too. After the wedding, he even told me 'You're part of *me* now.' and I was to do whatever he told me to do. I'd never had any sense of personal autonomy before so this was not new. I considered myself part of him - his. That's what marriage meant - you're a part of *me* now...When I finally realized that I needed help, I had no idea who I was. I had to overcome my fear of separation; to discover that I really did exist apart from him. I also had to find other images of God - images that allowed me to accept myself as female and made in God's image.

The power of the connection between word and experience is also demonstrated in Hyacinth's life. Her father deserted the family when she was only six months old. The image of God as a father was one that seemed "completely unavailable" to her. Hyacinth's distance from her own father coloured her image of God as father. She felt that God had abandoned her as her own

> ...father had done. A father was someone I occasionally heard about and was supposed to love. But I didn't know my father and couldn't love him. He wasn't someone I could turn to in time of need or count on to be there for me. That's how I pictured God the father as well. He was someone that existed for other people but not for me. I couldn't know or touch him. God the father was out for me.

Hyacinth's belief that God the father was distant, uninterested in her life or concerns kept her from

> taking the risk to trust that he could love me. I believed that I was of no account. The abuse confirmed my worst fears. I was alone. There was no one to care for me or to

protect me. Everything I heard about God the father was almost completely at odds with my experience.

Johnson (1992) points out that "an entire world order and world view are wrapped up" with the symbol one has of God and "specific ideas of God support certain kinds of relationship and not others" (p.36). Thus, the punishing, vengeful God of Denise's father could be called upon to justify both God's and her father's condemnation of her. Or the God who is spoken of as father could exemplify the absence and lack of care that Hyacinth experienced in her own father. Neither the teaching which Our Women received about God nor the experience of sexual abuse affirmed them as female persons. The teaching they received, heard and lived in the light of their experience, only served to deepen their disconnection from God and from themselves.

Negative Response to the Disclosure of Abuse

One of the factors that has been shown to either impede or assist survivors' healing from the trauma of sexual abuse is the response that others have to their disclosure of the abuse (Ensom, 1994; Hindman, 1989). Although some insight into the importance of others' responses to Our Woman's disclosure were implied in Our Women's comments on forgiveness, this issue will be explored a little further.

Many people go to their pastor when they need a listening ear or assistance in sorting out their lives. Denise decided that she would break the silence on her abuse to her pastor. She hoped for a supportive response. Unfortunately, that was not what she felt she received:

> I told him that I had problems with sex and how I masturbated a lot. And I even told him that I thought it may be because I was sexually abused as a child. But I wasn't heard by him at all. His only answer to me was "You don't need me. What you need is a psychiatrist." That hit me really hard. After that I stopped going to church for a long time.

Denise's family members did not want her to disclose the abuse. When she told them what had happened, they said, "Why couldn't you leave it be? What's to be accomplished by bringing that up now?" Some expressed their anger at the disclosure openly; others gave her the silent treatment or avoided any further contact with her. Instead of feeling the relief of unburdening her secret, Denise

> felt that I was the cause of a lot of trouble. No one seemed angry with my brother for abusing me. My sisters, brothers, my husband were angry with me for talking about it. I felt guilty for keeping it a secret and guilty for telling about it. Telling turned my life inside out and upside down and my family's life inside out and upside down. It took so long for me to be able to tell my husband and when I finally did tell him, he reacted in a very negative way. He really didn't understand and he still doesn't have an

understanding. I was angry at him because he wouldn't understand and he was not a support.

As an adult, Sofia gathered her courage and finally spoke to her mother about her abuse. She was hoping that her mother would be sympathetic and that she would help Sofia to piece together some of the details of her childhood over the time the abuse was occurring. "An older first cousin remembers vividly" witnessing an abusive incident that happened to Sofia when she was about six years old. "She came running into the house to Mom that bad things were being done to me by older boys and my mother did not come out of the house and see what was going on." Sofia's older sister also recalls "an incident of abuse where a neighbour lady brought me home...My sister recalls that the lady was very upset and was telling Mom what had happened to me. But Mom did nothing about that either." When Sofia recounted these and other incidents to her mother, her mother said that they could not have happened. "Every time I tried to talk to Mom about what happened she just denied it or said that I was such a good little girl. I think the hardest part of it all was that I was alone in it - alone to deal with it."

Hyacinth struggled with how to acknowledge the humanness of the offender without condoning what he did. Her dilemma in understanding how to "love the sinner while hating the sin" was compounded by the "way in which spokesmen for the Church responded to reports of sexual abuse by the clergy." Hyacinth observed that "church leaders' minimization of the problem" seemed to excuse or pardon the abuser's behaviour. "No one was encouraged to talk about what happened in the church. In fact, talking was clearly discouraged. In essence people were told it didn't happen. Forget about it." When the offender's behaviour did occasionally "come into the light", Hyacinth observed that

> nothing was said of the responsibility he bore for his behaviour or how what he had done was damaging to his victims. Clergy who were offenders got moved from one place to another without changing their offending behaviour one iota. Or, when the offender was finally held accountable for his actions, he disappeared without making amends for the harm he'd caused. The offender got therapy for his problems; the victims got nothing. No one acknowledged the victims' pain. The offender's needs were definitely placed above those of his victims.

The silence of church leaders to the plight of victims of sexual abuse was "deafening". Hyacinth believes that their response hurt not only the victims of abuse by clergy but all victims of sexual abuse. It "encouraged victims to stay locked in their silence." She wondered if the clergy who were supposed to be healers didn't hear the victims' cries, who would.

Family of Origin Issues

A general pattern of family dysfunction seemed to be common to the Women who were sexually abused within their immediate families. In addition to living with the sexual

abuse, Fiona described a pattern of male violence which seemed almost a way of life on the reserve where she lived: "alcoholism was so widespread there and husbands beat their wives so badly. These were common occurrences. Male and violence seemed synonymous." Without any healthy emotional attachment to their wives or children, many men on the reserve also neglected the economic needs of their families.

Ruth's father was an alcoholic who died when she was five. By the time Ruth was eleven, her mother was addicted to prescription drugs. During the years her father was alive, their living conditions were meagre: "We lived in a little one room shack." Ruth's "older sister was already being abused by two of our older brothers. The abuse was happening in the same room where I was and from what I can piece together, I was three when one of my brothers started abusing me." Later, after her father's death, the family moved into a three bedroom house. There, the abuse by her brother continued and her mother began abusing her. Ruth's older sister "tried to protect me and my younger sister when my brothers would come into the bedroom. She would push us close to the wall and tuck the sheets in around us." Her sister's efforts, however, were ineffective for herself as well as for Ruth. There was no escape.

Alcoholism became part of the fabric of Valerie's family life almost immediately after her father's return. At that time, her mother also began drinking heavily. Loud parties that went late into the might were a frequent occurrence as were the comings and goings of drunken men and women. As the alcohol use progressed so did parental neglect. Valerie and her brother became increasingly responsible for care of younger siblings as well as for their parents while also trying to care for themselves. Valerie's father was also given to bouts of physical violence against her brother and her mother.

Denise's family was full of secrets. "Don't tell" was rule number one. When she was three, Denise was sexually abused for the first time by her uncle. By the time she was twelve she had been repeatedly abused by her oldest brother. Denise would eventually learn that her older sisters as well as several cousins had also been abused within the family. Denise's father, although he was aware that the abuse was happening did not intervene. After his death, when Denise was fifteen, she went to live with an older married sister. What she thought would be a place of safety was not. Her brother-in-law began making sexual advances toward her. Denise was without support and without sufficient personal skills or resources to live on her own. She felt very trapped and defeated. "I had no where to go. I was living in his house, under his rules. There was no way out."

It was only a few years ago, after her oldest brother's death, that Denise learned he had been in a psychiatric hospital in Edmonton for over a year. No one in her family had breathed a word about the nature of her brother's illness or his hospitalization. When he left the family home, Denise thought only that he had finally left as any adult child would eventually do.

Sofia was the second of eight children. When she was just ten months old, her brother was born. Her sister was about a year older than she. Sofia felt that she had "never had her own place" in her family. She was not accorded the status she felt would be accorded to her had she been "the oldest" or "the youngest" or "the first" or "the only" - she was none of these. She always felt "squeezed out". Her father was a "good father" but he was a

silent sort of person and not given to verbal or physical demonstrations of his love. Neither was Sofia's mother. The relationship between them was always strained. It suffered further strain when Sofia learned that her mother knew what was happening to her, yet did nothing to stop it. Nor did her mother acknowledge it when, as an adult, Sofia told her about it.

Residential School

When Fiona was twelve years old, she was moved from the native reserve on which she was raised to a residential school run by the government. When news of the move first fell on her ears, Fiona was filled with hope:

> I wanted to stop the abuse that was happening to me on the reserve and I had pictured that if I went to the residential school, I'd be free of the abuse. And I pictured all this almost like a story book...In movies I'd seen at the reserve school, I saw people smiling and saw that people could be different. I was going to be the first lady of the native people and I would live in a mansion and be happy. And I thought if I could get off the reserve, this is what life could be like if things were different for me.

The dream and the reality, however, were very different for Fiona. She did not realize the things she would lose by leaving the reserve - her community, her siblings, her native language and spiritual traditions, her beloved "grandfather" (a tribal elder who always treated her kindly), even her prized long hair. The residential school

> turned out to be a big nightmare. I was constricted, locked up. What was taken from me physically, emotionally, spiritually, every way, was more than I could ever have imagined. And, as if I hadn't had enough already, I was sexually abused there. I was already broken. Living there broke me even more.

Conclusion

Teachings that suggested to Our Woman that she was responsible for what happened to her, others' lack of support or empathy for her pain or living in circumstances where terrible things happened and from which there was no ready escape all contributed to her sense of disconnection. They intensified the pain of her "torn-to-pieces-hood" and deepened the darkness in which she lived. It was not so much the darkness without that scared her, however, but the darkness within.

CHAPTER 6

Risking Re-connection

> ..."Living pain"...always contains at its heart the human encounter with meaning....The meaning of pain...always remains open to impermanent personal and social interpretations. It contains areas of darkness or mystery where firm answers may be simply unavailable. Its meanings thus must leave room not only for what we know and will come to know but also for what may remain forever unknown.
>
> (Morris, 1993)

> We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away the last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: The last of his freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.
>
> (Victor E. Frankl, 1959)

> We all have two lives: the one we're given and the other one we make.
>
> (Mary-Chapin Carpenter, 1993)

Introduction

The third conversational theme, which will be explored in this chapter, is the risk of reconnecting. Reconnection is a risk because it forces the survivor to face the very pain she is trying to escape. What Our Women eventually learned, however, is that for healing to occur, it is necessary to acknowledge and to go through their pain.

Sexual abuse is a pain-filled experience. For many Survivors it raises questions to which satisfactory answers cannot be found: Why me? Why did this happen? What have I done to deserve this? Why won't it stop? How could God let this happen? The chronic nature of such pain, bringing with it fear and doubt, raises other questions: Will I spend the rest of my life in pain? Will I ever feel whole again? Is there any way out of this?

The pain experienced by Our Women may be said more properly to be grief as a result of loss and betrayal. Pain and grief are not identical, to be sure. However, anyone who has known grief realizes that pain and grief "eventually proceed together, intertwined, in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to experience them apart...Severe emotional trauma, like illness or injury, is no less something felt along the pulses" (Morris, 1991, p.10). The pain of sexual abuse came from Our Women's "torn-to-pieces-hood", the loss of home - of belonging - that it created in them. The brokenness which they felt extended beyond their sense of their own fractured selves to their sense of shattered links between self and others, self and family, self and God, self and the idea of home. Broken within and disconnected without, Our Women could find no place where they belonged. They were not at home with self, others, God, or the world.

The problem of pain for Our Women derived, in part, from the explanations which they gave to their pain and the manner in which they dealt with their pain. One explanation they gave their pain was that it was sent by God as a punishment for sin. Such a conclusion taps the roots of pain's origin. The word "pain" derives from the Latin *poena* which means penalty or punishment. Early Greeks saw pain as visitation from the gods which usually came in the form of punishment. While the origins of this view are ancient , the view itself is alive today among those who attribute pain to divine punishment and to God's will. Our Women, not realizing the guilt they bore belonged to another, believed that they were deserving of God's punishment, as the following comments show:

> And when I had a bladder infection, I thought God was punishing me with these terrible, terrible pains and I guess I wanted God's approval because I never said anything. I just endured them. I just put up with them. I thought "this is what I deserve".

> I felt so guilty. If I died I wouldn't feel anything anymore. So I thought about suicide - many times - but the thought of God's eternal punishment was worse than the pain of being alive so I stayed alive. But I was afraid to go on holidays. I was afraid to be in a car. What if I had an accident and died? I'd go to hell for sure.

In creating and maintaining a God of retribution, Our Women established an internal congruity with their external reality: I am bad; I caused the abuse; God is punishing me; I must suffer.

Some of Our Women explained their pain to themselves by seeing it as proof of their worthlessness. Thus *poena* -pain- presented a paradox: pain (hurt or suffering), the outcome of the sexual abuse, was also the justification for the pain (punishment) itself. This connection is evident in the following excerpts:

> I felt so unlovable; so totally unworthy but the isolation and the hopelessness I felt seemed to me no more than I deserved.

> My grandmother called me the "evil one" and told me I was being abused because I was evil. She said it was my evil that made her and my mother do the things they did to me. I was not deserving of kindness or gentleness - I was evil. I deserved the pain I was in.

These and other explanations of suffering shaped the trajectory of Our Woman's life. If pain was divine punishment for her misdeeds, then Our Woman spent her energies trying to win God's favor. If the pain was proof of her personal worthlessness, she spent her life in the endless pursuit of perfection.

When we are in pain, it is natural to seek a cause. We hope that in finding the cause of our pain, we will also find relief from it. Our Women, too, searched for the cause of the pain that fractured their lives. Explanations seemed to hold out the possibility of comfort.

But finding explanations isn't enough. Saying that I hurt now because I was abused as a child doesn't really explain the pain or the abuse. It may even suggest that if I had not been hurt in childhood, I would not be hurting now and, so the logic goes, if the pain of the childhood trauma can be erased, pain can be healed forever.

> I blamed everything that wasn't going right in my life on the abuse. I told myself, "if only I hadn't been abused, then my life would be wonderful and I would have everything I want, the way I want it." Later, of course, I realized that the abuse was an important piece of my life history. It definitely had a negative impact on my life and it influenced the direction of my life. It arrested my growth as a human being. But, as I worked through the abuse and began to move beyond it, I discovered that pain, a different pain, but pain nonetheless, still existed. I've since figured out that pain is essential to being human. I realized that much of our growth - my growth - as human beings comes through pain.

What Fiona suggests to us with these words, is that pain is one of the basic human experiences that make us who we are. This is not to say that we should ignore pain or halt our efforts to understand and alleviate pain or that we should be insensitive to our own or others' pain. What it does suggest is that there is something in the nature of mystery to what we call pain. Pain hurts, afflicts, wounds, grieves, confuses, puzzles us. Pain disturbs the taken-for-grantedness of the world. Attempts to understand pain and to interpret it are imperatives of the experience of pain. We need to find a personal meaning in our pain.

When others deny, minimize or explain away our pain, it seems to be felt all the more. Denise said it "made me feel crazy" when others doubted or ignored the reality of her abuse and its impact on her life. Anger or shame or confusion at being dismissed or silenced yet again was added to the initial pain. And, as Fiona tells us, others' refusal to acknowledge the reality of her abuse increased "my attachment to it and to the story of it. I was sexually abused by my mother and my grandmother...I was hurt."

The memory of the hurt was very strong - so strong that Valerie could say, "For a long time, it seemed that the abuse was all there was to my life." Denise and Ruth described the abuse "as colouring everything in my life." For Fiona, the abuse "defined and shaped my life and who I had become." The abuse "was always with" Sofia. In their hurt, Our Women returned again and again to the question, "Why?". Insofar as the "why" of pain is part of its meaning, "why?" is an important question. But "why" is a question that cannot be adequately answered. "Why" is part of pain's mystery. As long as Our Women sought only to find an answer to the unfathomable "why?", they blocked the experience of their pain. They threw themselves into an avoidance of the reality of their suffering by forgetting, repressing or denying it. Denise said that lying was one way in which she covered her pain:

> I used to lie about everything. For years and years, I was covering up and protecting the fact that I had been abused. I was carrying out the message of the "don't tell" that's part and parcel of the abuse. The "don't tell" -that's where the lies got started.

> And, well, when I was a child and I did tell the truth, I got put in the corner and told "you're bad". So I didn't tell anyone again for a long time and I pretended that the abuse and everything that was attached to it didn't really matter.

Valerie avoided her pain by "being on medication...there was just getting medication and the next session (with the psychiatrist) would be looking at whether to change the dose of the medication and that's all there was. The medication kept me from feeling anything." Hyacinth ignored her body's needs and her health. Ruth "simply closed off. I felt nothing; nothing at all. I was numbed out." Even when she was in evident physical pain, she would ignore it. She refused to remove shoes that hurt her feet or to heed her body's needs for elimination or food. Denise lifted heavy machinery even after she had repeatedly injured her back. She blamed her husband and others for the lack of connection she had with them. When feelings of any kind surfaced in Sofia, she "pushed them back down. I wouldn't let them surface." Fiona moved from one relationship to another in an attempt to avoid facing the pain of her emptiness. Her "broken spirits" (Fiona's name for multiple personality disorder with which she was diagnosed), at first a means of coping with pain, later became the means to avoid pain and responsibility for her life.

The tendency to deny or ignore pain is not altogether surprising. We get very mixed messages about pain. One message is that the more pain one can bear, the more heroic one is. Professional athletes, for example, are praised for competing with broken bones and intractable pain. Exercise gurus encourage us to push ourselves "until it hurts" or to "go for the burn." Boys are told that not to cry is "to take it like a man." Taking pain is, thus, a sign of courage and strength. Pain may hurt but it cannot defeat us. We can endure despite the pain.

Infants cry when they are in pain. Such a response to pain is instinctive. It does not have to be learned. Thus, giving voice to pain may seem the usual response. Pain does not always find a voice, however. Over time we may well learn to calibrate our expression of pain. We learn new rules about pain: crying is no longer acceptable or we may cry only a certain amount or only about specific events or only under conditions prescribed by someone else. Most of what we know about pain and how to respond to pain is learned. Part of what we learn about pain is to deny it; to bear it in silence. Even when others permit us or we allow ourselves to give our pain a voice, we are often bereft of the language we need to speak it. This is especially true of chronic pain.

The pain of Our Women was a chronic pain. Their pain was not merely a symptom of their dis-ease but the diagnosis. Their response to pain was numbness - the absence of all feeling. The cause of the pain, however, lay less in the trauma of abuse than in their various failures to fully experience the losses it entailed. Their "pain wasn't lived out" (Duras, 1987, p.8).

Going Through the Pain

Each Woman discovered that she had to reach a point where she would choose to leave behind her story of injustice and abuse - even though it was true - and to enter into

the pain she had avoided for so long. Each had to "let go" and "get on "with her life. "Letting go", sometimes misinterpreted as "forgetting", was actually a way of remembering that allowed Our Woman to acknowledge her past, own it, make peace with it, learn from it and move beyond it. The preoccupation with finding the reason for the injustice of her childhood which was blocking her from the opportunities for healing and liberation available in the present had to be surrendered. Denise expressed it this way: "As long as I was locked into finding *the* reason why this happened, I wasn't getting anywhere. I had to give up looking for *the* reason and accept that it happened. Once I accepted it, the question became 'how am I going to deal with this'?"

Letting go of the search for reasons allowed the Women to enter their pain - to live it out - and to begin the process of grieving. Grieving was the beginning of finding "How". Each Woman named this issue as an important turning point in her spiritual development. Ruth discovered:

> For healing to take place, it was necessary to go through the pain; to really feel it and to grieve; to feel the loss of my childhood and to know that my mother sexually abused me. I had to feel that loss; to admit that that was what *my mother* did to me; to *really* feel that and to know that it wasn't because I was a bad person, I wasn't a bad girl. It was something that just happened.

Hyacinth spoke of the need

> to acknowledge and embrace the pain. I had to acknowledge where I'd been before so I could heal and get to where I needed to go. I couldn't deny it anymore like I did all those years. It happened. It was actual; a reality. I had to touch the pain and feel it; that's the only way healing could begin to happen for me...Once I embraced the pain, I could open my heart and begin to experience the healing that came from surrendering to my deepest feelings. In feeling the pain in all its force and then transforming the meaning I gave to that pain, I finally felt everything and, for the first time in my life, I felt forgiven by God for being human.

It was the weight of their homelessness - of their loss of connection - that cast Our Women into numbness and denial. Allowing themselves to "live out" their pain became the way through their loss. Facing the pain flung them into crisis where they were faced with the choice to continue to live in disconnection and brokenness or to risk reaching out, to risk trust, to risk finding home. Letting go of the old and comfortable way of being for a new and unfamiliar way was not easy even when the new way was seen to be a better way. Our Women did not make such a decision easily or in one moment. Denise vacillated: "Back and forth. Back and forth. I wanted to change but I was frightened by the unknown. However bad things were, at least I knew what to expect." Ruth told herself "I can't do this. It's too difficult." Hyacinth found "the words of Christ forming on [her] lips: Take this cup away from me." Fiona "kept hoping for an easy way , a formula to follow, a magic wand. Anything that would get me where I wanted to go without the suffering."

Help for the Journey

What was it that encouraged Our Women to face their losses and to "live out" their pain? There is no single answer to this question. A common thread running through Our Women's responses was the importance of finding someone they could trust and who would hear their story without judgement or without offering a solution. In this regard, therapists and spiritual directors played an important role as guides for the journey of healing. Societal changes, particularly the women's movement, that brought the issue of sexual abuse out into the light was also helpful. Books which spoke to the issue of sexual abuse and its impact helped Our Women understand that their experience was not an isolated one and that help was available; workshops which presented healthy views on human sexuality and which helped to correct misinformation or fill gaps in Our Women's knowledge and understanding of sexuality; the use of non-sexist language in liturgical readings; a more encompassing role for women in Christian churches were all named as helps to healing. Some beneficial experiences were unique. Sometime after Denise gave up her business she decided to pursue her dream of working with children. In one of her courses she learned about the use of metaphor, images and symbols as ways of expressing complex realities. Armed with this new information and awareness, she began to read the Bible in a new way. A richer language for naming God emerged. During her sabbatical year, Sofia fell in love for the first time in her life. When she returned to her religious community, she went back with an appreciation of community and connection and her own value. Valerie began reading the works of noted authors such as Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. Their writings opened up a whole new world of ideas and self-understanding. Learning about the culture of the goddess also assisted Valerie in reshaping her ideas about God and the meaning of God for her life.

It was not these things in and of themselves that brought about the change in Our Women. An essential feature of their openness to all of these things was their timing. The point of crisis for each Woman came somewhere between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. This period of their lives seemed to naturally usher in the "season of discontent" or the proverbial mid-life crisis. Whatever we or they choose to call it, there was a readiness and a growing sense that "something is wrong with my life"; that something deeper but unknown was calling. This is not to say that the transformation was merely a matter of "right timing" or that it was somehow automatic or achieved without effort. The Women spoke of experiences of disorientation and its accompanying crisis in feelings of "boredom", "uncertainty", "going through the motions", "anger", "hopelessness", "imprisonment", " despair", "anxiety", "panic", "fear", "nausea". Things that were once vitally important were losing their interest. A period of darkness and aridity had begun. The call to "wake up" had been sent out by some invisible and irresistible force.

Valerie began having very vivid and powerful dreams such as the one in which she was flying above the earth. "I was flying out over the earth and I could see its curvature and I thought to myself 'I hope we don't self-destruct'. And I think it was because I was looking at something that was so beautiful. But it was being destroyed by pollution, by the terrible things we were doing to it and our disregard for its beauty". Valerie credits her

dreams with providing her the impetus to examine her life "up close" and to begin the journey back to home. "I gave up all medication. I just made up my mind that I was going to get well. I flushed all the pills down the toilet."

Dreams also played a guiding role in Sofia's life. Insights obtained by examining what the dreams might be telling her "encouraged me to keep going" even though "it was really uncomfortable." Sofia admitted she no longer found satisfaction in the work she was doing and felt the need for change.

> I was feeling a push - almost a need - from within to change. I wasn't exactly sure of the change I needed but I knew I needed to change. Feelings of anger were starting to come up in me and, though I wanted to keep them in, I really couldn't. I started having these bouts of anger. I would get really angry over peccadilloes. I really thought I was going crazy. Not knowing who that was who was feeling those feelings - not knowing at all - I asked for a year off to give myself some time to sort things out; to figure out who I was. I wanted a chance to have a new start; to begin my life anew. Although I didn't deal with the sexual abuse at that time, it was an important opening and a transition that allowed me to deal with it later.

At age forty, Hyacinth was keenly aware of an inner dissatisfaction with her life but could not yet recognize its source. "I wanted this joy and this life that I saw in other people and which Jesus said he'd come to give us but I didn't yet know how to get it". The answer to her question was soon to unfold. Hope for new life was strengthened by a book she read about another woman's success in overcoming chronic depression. "I thought if that could happen for her, maybe it can happen for me, too." What was particularly significant in the woman's story for Hyacinth was the fact that, although the woman was not a Catholic, she cited the compassion and support of a Catholic priest as instrumental to her healing. Hyacinth decided she would risk telling a priest she knew about her life. She met with him, talking about various troubling aspects of her life several times before she could finally tell him about her childhood experience of sexual abuse.

> When I told him I thought he'd be absolutely shocked and repulsed.. Instead of being reviled by what I had said, he put his hands on me..and he spoke and his words were to the effect "My child, how I have waited for you; wept with you." I couldn't believe it. It was perfect for me. The words were healing. The whole experience was healing. I felt for the first time in my life the compassion of God; how God was holding my life. It was a moment of grace and healing.

Hyacinth's husband responded with a similar compassion when, a short time later, she told him about her childhood experience. His acknowledgement and acceptance of the reality of the abuse, "his gentleness with me and his compassion" helped Hyacinth to see that "it was not God who abandoned me. My image of myself wouldn't allow me to see that God loved me all along. It was my image of myself that kept me from trusting and kept me closed to the people and the world around me. I had cut myself off." On

Hyacinth's fortieth birthday, her husband gave her a card on which he'd written "Life begins at forty." For Hyacinth, "That was really true. My life was really beginning."

The faint murmurings of unrest that had been building in Fiona for "a couple of years" finally reached their full height in mid-life. Feeling the need to re-order her life and to heal the brokenness of her life, Fiona began "putting feelers" out in search of a therapist. She found one. Later, she says, "I realized that was the easy part." It took time for Fiona to open herself up to the therapist and to begin to tell her story but the wait and the risk proved worthwhile:

> Once I learned I could trust her, I really connected with her. My spirituality began to change. I began to see that there was an innocence and a beauty and a goodness in me that I had never recognized before. And her strength helped me to be stronger. Her strength was an energy that passed between us. It helped me to do the work I needed to do. And even though it was very hard, I would come away feeling it was good. I knew then that the Spirit was working through her and empowering me to do the healing work I needed to do. In such a way, I learned what's healthy and became whole.

Denise had always been good at her work. She owned and operated her own company which provided services and goods that her husband's company required. But Denise was growing increasingly disinterested and unhappy in the business. She decided she would turn the business over to her husband. The transfer of ownership took two years. Despite the slow pace, Denise's husband was very angry with her. He told her "I've got a three-legged stool and you're knocking a leg off it." The emotional distance between Denise and her husband, already wide, grew even wider and her relationship with her daughter also become strained. "The point of no return came when I believed that there was more pain staying the way I was than there would be in changing. I figured I might as well go for the gain." Denise decided she needed help to sort things out so she began seeing a therapist. She was tired of identifying herself and being identified as an "abuse victim". In therapy, she began to see that

> the abuse was my *experience;* it shaped me but it wasn't *me.* It is not who I am. Going through the pain was hard but I had to do it in order to let it go. In letting it go I emptied myself of it and a space, a room, was created for new experiences that allowed me to see who I truly am and who God is and to rejoin the world.

Much time can pass between the time a decision is formed in the mind and the time it is actualized. Ruth recalls that, in 1976 when she was 26 years old, she made a vow to herself that she would go back to school; that someday she would show her mother and her husband that they were wrong; that she wasn't "stupid". She said, "I can't explain it but something deep within me told me I could learn." Ruth doesn't know what it was at that time that prompted her promise to herself. But with it, a seed of hope was planted. The seed grew until Ruth was thirty eight. At that point, there was only what she can call "an

awakening" inside her which prompted her to leave all that was familiar and come to Edmonton where she entered university. The seed had finally blossomed and, with it, Ruth set her life on a new course.

Care is required to set one's life on the journey to healing or else, as Valerie admitted, the pain can become an end in itself: "This was a hard thing for me to admit - it was very egotistical of me - but there was a point where I almost wallowed in my pain." But to wallow is to be stuck in the pain - it is to abort the journey. It is only by moving through the pain that growth occurs and new meaning is found. The first step is a big step, as Valerie learned:

> Going through the pain started me on the journey to the place I am now. If I had continued to ignore the pain, I wouldn't have gotten anywhere. But eventually, I couldn't ignore it anymore. It just kept coming to me - boom! boom! boom! I think the Spirit said "you're going to deal with this. You're going to look at it and deal with it and until you do, you're not going on to greater things.

Denise expressed the movement this way: "Good Friday is essential but it isn't an end in itself. The point is to move into the Easter Sunday experience and to live from that. It was through both Good Friday and Easter Sunday that I learned who God is - and who I am."

Saying Good-bye to an Old Story

The pain of Our Women was felt as a violation, a mistreatment, an injustice and therefore, something to be fought against. It filled them with anger - even rage - against the people and the situation that caused the pain. Facing the pain and accepting it for what it was invited grief and the gradual softening of the pain. It allowed for the telling of a new story rather than trying to make the old one "turn out right or turning it into 'and they all lived happily ever after'. The truth is, they didn't." Fiona summed it up by saying, "It was time to stop looking for someone else who could make my life turn out differently. I was hurt deeply. I never had the mother or grandmother or father I hoped for." Valerie would never have "the perfect life I imagined as a child." Sofia's mother would continue to insist that the trusted family friend could not possibly have abused her. Denise's father would never tell her, "It wasn't your fault. You weren't responsible for what happened." "There's no going back to being a child", said Ruth. "That's gone. I just had to tell myself - it *is* gone." To feel the sadness of their loss with all its pain and loneliness was to grieve what never was and never would be. It was also to begin a new story in which connections would be restored and new life would be born.

When the pain came to be viewed as something having the possibility to bring forth life, the Women were able to allow it. When the first faint signs of life began to be felt, there was hope and a new sense of responsibility for themselves and for the direction of their lives. Ruth

came to realize that the sexual abuse I endured as a child was not the *whole* of my childhood experience. There were many things in my life that I'd lost sight of or lost touch with because the abuse loomed so large. It coloured the whole of my life and became the only lens through which my life was viewed. But I could only see that when I was able to acknowledge that was the way it was. Denial of the pain of the abuse and its effects kept me locked into the very pain I was trying to relieve. Admitting the pain was a turning point. It was pain itself that was the gift, not painlessness. By welcoming the pain, inviting its full expression, I could begin to look at it in new ways, give it new meaning and transform my life into something better, alive, different. I was not just asking "Who am I?" anymore but "What sort of person should I be?"

There's a Crack in Everything

Feeling the pain of loss brought an unexpected blessing to the Women. With the expression of pain, anger, sorrow, grief came also feelings of peace, joy, love, gratitude. These moments were signs of hope, breakthroughs of the Spirit. Control, boredom, resentment, brokenness, revenge, disconnection began to give way to letting go, wonder, gratefulness, healing, forgiveness, connection.

The Women found themselves going back over their lives - not to relive the past or to change it but to retrieve the forgotten pieces of themselves. Personal joys, successes, gifts and competencies as well as the affirmation, love, caring, kindness and reaching out of others which had been denied or spurned were acknowledged and brought back into the light. For Fiona, it was "like discovering old pictures in an album or rediscovering a teddy bear that had been sitting in the back of a closet or reopening the cottage after the long months of winter. Everything was old and yet, it was also new. What I needed and longed for had been there all along but I had shut it up and stored it away."

Specific moments were shared with me in story. Valerie recalled the joy of the years before her father's return. "I believe those first five years were crucial to me in giving me that initial stable setting and I think now that it really saved me from a worse outcome...I was loved a lot in those early years. I'm really grateful for that - really grateful." She also spoke about her experience of the United church when she was in the fourth through sixth grades. It was Valerie's two friends who invited her to her first experience of church. She remembered how she enjoyed the singing, the socializing and the welcoming attitude that church members displayed toward her.

"My Dad was good to me", said Sofia. "I had a very positive image of a father. The building blocks were there. I had been loved. Once I was ready to focus on *that*, it made it easier to move in a positive direction in my life. And I could begin to see God's love reflected in human love." Sofia could also see that, despite the distance between herself and her mother, there were many good things she had received from her mother. She also came to appreciate the tremendous time, energy and responsibility raising eight children demanded of her mother. "I realize now that my mother did the best she could. She did as well as she knew how."

Hyacinth had renewed appreciation for her brother-in-law. "I was just a little kid and he'd take me on the crossbar of his bike when he was dating my sister. They'd take me along with them for picnics and we'd pick berries and that kind of thing. When I got in touch with that, I realized I did have an image of a father after all. He was the father that I thought I never had." It was not that these shared moments were obliterated or unnoticed at the time they occurred in Hyacinth's life. Rather, the warmth, caring and generosity revealed by them was shrouded by the negative fallout of sexual abuse.

For several years Ruth attended the Lutheran church. She remembered now how even then she had appreciated its social aspects. Looking back with new eyes on those years, she remembered something else which, in light of her new vision, acquired a deep significance. At the church she had developed

> a really good, intimate relationship with the minister. He was a good, good friend...It was excellent because he was a man and I had always been afraid of men. He supported me and listened to me. And, best of all, he never abused me. He would hug me but he never crossed the line and, when I think about it now, he very easily could have. It was he who kept the boundaries, not me. Not that I tried to cross over to him or anything like that. I didn't. But if he had come to me sexually, I would have gone to him because, at that time, I didn't know any other way.

As a child, Fiona thought that her "grandfather" would take her away from those who abused her. Now she realizes that he probably didn't know what was happening in her life. But she sees that, in another way, he did rescue her by

> showing me the potential and the good that was in me and which was always available. He always had time for me. And he'd tell me about the Great One...He had a fish house. And when I was with him I was often difficult and he would send me to the fish house. And I would want to be with him and I would come out. Sometimes the angry one would come out or the one who fought or the one who didn't hear. Then my grandfather would send me back into the fish house and he'd say, "That's not the one I want". And he'd do that until the one he wanted came out. Then he'd say "This is the one the Great One wants and the one that the Great One will work with." Then he and I would do chores or go for a walk.

As I listened to the Women speak about the change which began in them at mid-life, they were describing what in the classic language is called conversion. Theirs indeed was a turning around of mind and heart that set their lives in a new direction. They were beginning to see the light through the cracks by risking new interpretations of their childhood experience that affirmed their own worth as human beings. The conversion also brought in its wake an accompanying understanding of the positive value of their female bodiliness and of connectedness. Their awakening to their own value was also a new experience of God: "i found god in myself and i loved her, i loved her fiercely."(Ntzoake Shange, 1976, p. 63)

CHAPTER 7

Coming Home: Reclaiming Connection

> There is really nothing more to say - except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.
>
> (Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye)*

> In the beginning everything was in relationship and in the end everything will be in relationship again. In the meantime, we live by hope.
>
> (Jean Lanier, *The Second Coming*)

> Life does not accommodate you; it shatters you. It is meant to, and it couldn't do it better. Every seed destroys its container or else there would be no fruition.
>
> (F. Scott-Maxwell, in *The Beacon Book of Quotations by Women*, Ed. R. Maggio)

Introduction

The great mystic, St. John of the Cross, speaks eloquently of the "dark night of the soul". The phrase itself has a poetry and romance to it - not so the experience. As Our Women learned, the dark night is a painful, confusing process of unknowing in which everything familiar or habitual is lost. Our Women's losses were not all felt at once but over a period of time. They experienced loss of their God-images, of their self-images, of their previously held understandings of their identities and those of others, sometimes even of their own thoughts. Yet, once they were in the experience and despite feelings of agitation, helplessness and emptiness, there was no one who described herself as wanting to get out of it or to get it "over with." They discovered "night, thou was my guide" and as, Fiona put it, a sense that, "in spite of everything there was something about it that seemed right and that everything would somehow turn out for the better...The only way I can explain it is to say I came to a point where I knew I had to trust the darkness." In trusting the darkness, Our Women began to reestablish the broken connections and to journey home. It is to this, our fourth and final conversational theme, that this chapter speaks.

With the darkness came light and healing. Hyacinth described the movement as a *dawning*. Her choice of word is an interesting one because it speaks to the multilayered quality of the experience. At one level, dawn is the beginning of daylight. At another, it is the beginning of something new; the issuing forth or developing of something. At still another level, dawn describes the experience wherein something begins to be understood or felt. The dawning of Our Women carries all of these meanings. First there was a "crack of light...then...another crack of light. Then...*forms* in the light...[They] recognized there was no darkness, that in darkness there'll always be light" (Nevelson, 1976 cited in Maggio, 1992). Entering the darkness was a necessary part of Our Women's journey to wholeness and light. Once they were willing to face the pain of remembrance and to

mourn their losses, they were able to begin to re-member their lives; to reclaim the connections.

To reclaim is to recover what was lost or set aside. Its root meaning, to cry out against (from the Latin *reclamare),* reveals a deeper meaning which is also appropriate here. To reclaim is to rescue or bring back from a wrongful and abandoned condition. At a personal level, it means healing the fractured elements of Our Women's lives - healing the torn-to pieces-hood of their relationships with themselves, others and God. It means integrating the experiences of the past with who they are in the present. And, along the way, they discovered it means repairing the rips in the tapestry of the world.

Having lived through the pain of their disconnection, Our Women were set on a new course in their lives which they variously called "an awakening", "a new life", "a rebirth". This awakening or new life is a journey marked by profound changes in their lives and in their way of being in the world. The metaphor of journey best describes the course of change when it is seen as a wandering path rather than a straight line. Our Women's growth was a mixture of flow and ebb, of moving forward and falling back. Sometimes, it was to be at a standstill - a developmental plateau. The jerky nature of the journey is the nature of the process of development.

In this chapter, Our Women describe some of the changes that have come about in their lives as a consequence of the process of reclamation, the fourth conversational theme. The changes are not once for all, as we shall see, but are part of an ongoing process of development which will find its ultimate fulfilment only in death.

Reclaiming the Body

Reclaiming the body means several things for Our Woman. It means to acknowledge the body and pay attention to what it has to tell her. It means to embrace the sensual and the erotic as part of her spiritual nature. It means to recognize that the flesh is not just a vehicle for the holy: the flesh itself is holy.

The acknowledgement of her body as good began in Hyacinth's appreciation of herself as female. "The Bible tells us that God created us male *and female* and it says that we are made in God's image. *I* am made in God's image." The words themselves were not new to Hyacinth. What was new was the way in which she heard them. The personal realization of her participation in the *imago Dei* was a breakthrough in self-naming for Hyacinth which allowed her to appreciate herself as female. This appreciation of her femaleness was experienced simultaneously as an acceptance of her bodiliness and of her sense of self. Thus, it was an acceptance of the "out there" and the "in here" dimensions of being female.

Out of Hyacinth's new appreciation of her divine likeness came an ability to care for her body; to give it proper rest and nutrition and to be grateful for her body's ability to experience pleasure. For the first time, she "really felt [her] body is a temple of the Spirit." A new appreciation of sexuality as God's gift to her allowed Hyacinth to enjoy her sexual relationship with her husband instead of dreading it or feeling that it was sinful. Being able to feel good about her sexuality and its expression created a deepening bond between

Hyacinth and her husband and "allowed me to feel holy in my body; in my sexuality. My body and my sexuality have become one of the ways in which God is revealed to me."

Sofia also has come to see her body as God's revelation. With the reclamation of her body Sofia has removed her sexual feelings from the forbidden zone where she had always been troubled by them. She now knows that they are a normal, healthy part of herself. As a result she has "become much more relaxed in the whole area of sex. I can say 'I'm feeling these feelings but I can choose what I want to do with them. I don't *have* to act on them'. Before I felt much less in control." One of the benefits which a healthier and "more mature" view of sex and sexuality has brought to Sofia is a stronger commitment to a life of celibacy. Previously Sofia had seen her life as a "running away from" sexuality, from bodiliness. Now she sees her sexuality and her bodiliness as the force and the vehicle through which she is able to commit her life to God and to the service of others.

Bodiliness has taken on new meaning for Fiona also. She feels she has "much more control in [her] life" and that she can relate to others in an intimate non-sexual way. Disconnection from her body allowed Fiona to objectify her body; to see it as something "not of me." As long as her body was felt as "not me", Fiona found it difficult to establish appropriate boundaries between herself and others. "I sexualized all relationships. Physical sex was the only way I knew how to connect with others." Without boundaries, Fiona lacked protection not only for her body but for herself. For a long time, she did not see the link between her lack of self-regard and her lack of claim on her body. The turnaround came when she "no longer viewed [her] body as an 'it'." Learning to heal the body/mind split that resulted from her sexual abuse enabled Fiona to take back her body as part of herself. "I now know I *am* my body, it isn't something external to me...When I hurt my body or show it disrespect, I am doing that to myself also." Her deepened awareness and appreciation of her bodiliness allows her a new enjoyment in being: "I can relish my body, my femaleness, my sexuality."

Denise's changed attitude toward her body is revealed in her enjoyment of her senses and the delights they reveal to her. She is now able to touch her body "in a gentle way" and to appreciate the "comforting touch of others." Years of beige have given way to bright colours of various hues. Shortly after her transformative experience had begun, Denise went on holiday to Hong Kong. While there, she began to "really see colours for the first time" and to have an appreciation of flowers with their distinctive colours and scents. "It was like I suddenly woke up...and became aware of beauty all around me." The proof that the experience of Hong Kong "has never left" her can be seen in the colourful and well-fitted clothes that Denise now wears and which attest to the end of her need to hide her body.

In reclaiming the goodness of her body and her femaleness, Denise has also renewed her appreciation of women's potential to give birth and her own experience as life-giver.

> I think that the ability to bring forth life is special. I hold that in common with other women as part of my femaleness but it's also my own unique experience. I experienced that ability directly by giving birth to my children and I'm very glad I did.

Reflecting on it has opened up a deep appreciation of the power of being a woman. Denise does not restrict her potential as life-giver only to the physical act of giving birth, however. The process of reestablishing connection is also a life-giving experience - a bringing forth of life within herself and of encouraging life to bud forth in others. The metaphor of giving birth is a powerful one and speaks to an essential aspect of Our Women's spiritual development. Birthing symbolizes the unseen but real growth that takes place in darkness. The growth is slow, uneven, silent and, though no one knows the exact moment when new life will emerge, they know that it will.

For Denise, her femaleness is also an experience of the divine within. "It was of Mary, a woman, that God came into the world. The mother of God was one of us. It was of *her* that he was born. When I reclaimed my femaleness, it was that female, life-giving energy I connected with." With this new vision of herself and enlivened by this new energy, Denise no longer holds the view that she or other women are "second rate to men. That's not the image I have any more. I see myself as valuable in myself, my body as good, my sexuality as good."

The body is intelligent; it knows when it is thirsty, hungry, cold, needs rest. When Ruth began listening to her body, paying attention to its needs and taking care of them, she stopped her old habit of ignoring her body and overriding its communication to her. "I no longer ignore signals of pain or discomfort like I used to do. Before I was just dulling out. Now I listen to my body and its inner wisdom. Now if I need to go to the bathroom, I go. If my shoes hurt my feet, I take them off." In this new awareness of her body, Ruth has become healthier and more conscious of maintaining a healthy lifestyle through proper nutrition and exercise. Ruth gives part of the credit for her new appreciation of her body and her sexuality to the twelve step program of Al-Anon. "The self-discovery aspect of the program helped me resolve the sex issue for myself. I concluded that sex is God-given and therefore it's good." What is more surprising to her is her increased awareness of joy. "Before I couldn't feel the joy *fully*; I couldn't feel it to my depths. To feel the joy in my body I also had to feel the pain." Self-care is now seen as an obligation and a responsible stewardship of her body. "I have to look after myself, not in a selfish way, but in a way that respects my body, that honours my body and God within it."

Reading and reflection on the Goddess helped Valerie deepen her appreciation of her femaleness. "I learned that followers of the early Goddess religion were very aware of their sexuality and of their sexual powers and they celebrated them. They celebrated themselves as female." Valerie, too, is celebrating her body and her power as embodiments of the Goddess. She no longer sees men as completing women or as their superiors. Valerie's new understanding is echoed in the words of Carlson (1989):

> Whether we think of the Goddess as a personified Being or as energy that occurs within and between women, the image of the Goddess is an acknowledgement of female power, not dependent on men nor derived from the patriarchal vision of women...The Goddess reflects back to us...positive images of our power, our bodies, our wills, our mothers. To look at the Goddess is to remember ourselves, to imagine ourselves as whole (p.55).

Valerie's views on sex and sexuality have changed as an outcome of her connection to the Goddess. Now she sees them as "an expression of God's life and a reflection of communion with God. Without an acceptance of my sexuality, I can't really realize my spiritual potential..." This, Valerie added, "makes sex a serious thing. But it also makes it playful - fun."

Part of the process of learning to appreciate her body, was "learn(ing) to live *in* it because I tended to want to get *out* of it...Now I'm very much in the here and now and *I'm* doing this or that. It's very grounding." Living in her body has made Valerie aware of what enhances or hinders her health. As a result she has made changes to her diet and has taken up walking as a regular form of exercise.

A New Vision of Self

The journey through darkness to light brought profound change in Our Woman's identity. She spoke of discovering that her "old self" no longer fit. A time of recovering health, dreams, humour, creativity, feelings and intuitions was ushered in. Like Shirley Valentine, the principal character in the movie by the same name, Our Woman looked back over her life and realized that so much of it had been unlived. With Valentine she could say:

> I've allowed myself to lead a little life while inside me there was so much more...Why do we get all this life if we never use it? Why do we get all these feelings and dreams and hopes if we don't ever use them? Dreams. They are never in the place you expect them to be.

The process of reclaiming self is to allow dreams and hopes and feelings to come alive and to live from them. The dream was not where Denise expected it to be. The process of reclaiming herself was assisted by her growing connection to the world of mythology and fairy tales. "My children were saying 'Mom's getting into her second childhood' because I had all these fairy tales and myths and children's books." In her reading Denise discovered Dionysius, the god of wine and ecstasy, the mystic, lover and wanderer. In Dionysius, she also discovered something of her lost self.

> I discovered that the roots of my name were from Dionysius. It was a revelation. Dionysius symbolized something alive, exuberant. That's what I was missing. Now I wanted to reclaim it and I did. Re claiming my name was vital to reclaiming myself. When I reclaimed my own name, I claimed my *inner* strength and a sense of myself as a reflection of God. Before I had expressed my physical strength outwardly in my muscles. I would do whatever the men would do and it was all "out there". That has changed. I don't need to do that anymore. Now my strength is within and it shows itself in determination, courage, saying "no" when it's appropriate. So there has been a merging of "feminine" and "masculine" aspects of myself and the achieving of a balance in my life.

In order to secure that balance, Denise began to tune into her own needs and to care for them. "I decided to make myself count to myself." Against her husband's wishes and without his support, Denise decided to return to school to pursue a lifelong dream of working with children. The decision, an expression of an unfulfilled aspect of herself and an answer to a call from within, brought unexpected blessings:

> doors were opening for me that I never thought possible. One of those was the courage to quit the business with my husband even though it meant his anger. And another door opened. I was accepted into college and I did well in the program. Then another door - as soon as I finished the program I got a job. So many gifts were opening through those doors. I realized that I was receiving more than I had put in.

Denise found a new confidence in herself and in her abilities. She saw herself as a person with choices and the ability to choose. She saw herself as responsible for her life.

> I realized that I have to say "yes" and I concentrated on what I felt I had to do and stopped saying "well, I don't have a choice. My husband or somebody else doesn't want me to do this." The fact that I did choose and doors started opening gave me the message that God wants me to choose and that the power and responsibility to choose are in me. I can define myself and my life instead of always following what others laid out for me.

Denise found herself looking increasingly inward for the answers to her life's questions and for setting "the course and direction for my life." Dreams became an important part of her inner directedness and her recovery of self. She discovered her dreams had important things to tell her and that paying attention to them made her feel well. She saw her dreams as the means "to continue healing while I sleep." Drawing on her own inner resources, taking responsibility for life and making choices gave Denise a new vision of herself. "I reached a point where I knew I was a victim no more. I am not to blame for what had happened in the past but I *am* responsible for what I'm doing *now*."

Making choices for her life was also an important step to Valerie's reclaiming of herself. Others had often pointed out Valerie's creative abilities especially in writing and painting. Valerie, however, "guarded my writing -even from my husband. I thought I was being arrogant if I showed my work to others." Encouraged by her therapist and a friend, Valerie began to share her work with others. She received positive feedback. Her self-esteem soared and a new image of herself emerged. "For me, it was almost as if the Spirit said 'it's okay to be creative now. It's safe now. You won't be rejected. You can paint or write poetry." Until then, Valerie had allowed her father's criticism and devaluation of her painting to act as a strict internal censor and to freeze her into inaction. Once Valerie decided "to choose [her] life", she began to pursue the long abandoned creative energies within her. New words entered her vocabulary of self-description "competent", "unique", "gifted", "poet", "someone with something worthwhile to share with others" and, with

them, new experiences of self - "joyful", "grateful", "connected", "good", "worthwhile" and "valued".

For Sofia, reclaiming self began when she went on sabbatical. That year allowed her time for solitude, silence and reflection during which she learned to listen to her self again and learned "about being instead of just doing." Knowing how to *be* has taught Sofia that she has an intrinsic value of her own. She no longer believes that her worth comes from doing more or trying harder or being "a good girl" or holding a degree or pleasing others or following their prescriptions for her life. Her self-disdain has been replaced by an appreciation of her qualities of caring, compassion, trustworthiness, honesty, thoughtfulness.

She sees herself now as being "much more tolerant and patient with myself and with others. I used to be so rigid. Everything was either black or white. There was no grey. Now I recognize that there's a lot of grey; a lot of things we simply don't know or fully understand." She has let go of the need for perfection and with it "the need to be right and to have all the answers." The letting go has allowed Sofia to be

> more relaxed and much more self-aware. I was always finding my reference points outside myself instead of looking inside. I always compared myself to somebody out there. I don't do that anymore. I'm more attentive to feelings, insights and to tapping into my inner wisdom by being more attentive to the stirrings of the Spirit and the voice within.

Hyacinth's current vision of her self began with this statement: "I'm younger. I'm younger in my spirit. I'm more alive in my spirit. I'm healthy and energetic." Hyacinth's newfound self was an "answer to prayer". Her prayer arose spontaneously from deep within her as a response to the darkness and emptiness she was feeling. Hyacinth noted that prayer wasn't any sort of magic or instant relief. Praying didn't change the external circumstances of her life but it changed her. By turning her quest inward, prayer put Hyacinth in touch with her "inner self - my best self" and with those "inner strengths and resources I hadn't realized I had." It gave her a different perspective on her life; it showed her that she didn't need to count only on herself; that there is something greater than herself to which she is connected.

> There followed this gradual process of becoming new or, actually, becoming my true self for the first time. I gradually grew into an acceptance of myself as good. That I can be acceptable; I can be lovable; I can be worthy. And I am. The real genuine person that I am is good, lovable, worthy because that's who I was created by God to be. A much more balanced view of my self also emerged: I have faults and failings, but that doesn't negate my goodness. And I became much more motivated - I think that's the word - I know I have the power to make choices that will affect my life and the lives of others. All of this was a gradual process. I didn't get suddenly zapped by the Holy Spirit.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Fiona who also discovered that "The Great One didn't zap me and make me change. I changed myself in response to the Great One's kindness shown to me through others. I had to be open to it and to want it." Once struggling with her "broken spirits" drained Fiona of all energy and enthusiasm for life. Fiona's self is now whole; she "feels alive", "reborn". She found the "choice for life was not an easy one." Yet, she has chosen not only to live but to live from her

> deepest, core self. That is my real self where the Great One lives within me. But I didn't know that before. I didn't see myself as belonging to the Great One. Once I realized that - wow! It was like everything made sense. My life, death, everything made sense. I had come home.

Fiona's life acquired meaning and with the meaning came a sense of purpose. "I know now that I matter and how I live my life matters so I try to do my best to live my life as fully as I can. I know there's something that I'm here to do and I'm going to do it."

Ruth, too, spoke of having acquired meaning and purpose in her life and "a sense that I'm worthwhile". The process of reclaiming self, once feared, is now seen as a necessary step toward wholeness. The pain of "rebirthing the self" is forgotten now that new life has come forth. The process of nurturing and strengthening that new life continues:

> There are many things I'm still working on. I know the process will never be completely finished...I make mistakes and I don't do things perfectly. In fact I don't even try to do things perfectly anymore. Now I'll wash my windows and I'll just wash them. I don't try to get every little streak off of them.

Releasing herself from the tyranny of perfection has given Ruth permission to be finite, limited, human. Knowing herself and accepting her own imperfection has shown her that "it's okay to be limited and weak." Acknowledgement of her own imperfection has helped her to be compassionate with herself and to judge herself less harshly. Making mistakes is no longer the basis for self-condemnation but an opportunity to grow, to ask herself, "What can I learn from this? How can I use this to help me become the person I am called to be, to go beyond myself?" In the process, Ruth is

> happier with my life. I feel a responsibility for who I am, for the choices I make and for shaping my life and its direction. I have an inner contentment and peace that I hadn't known before...I'm no longer looking for the missing pieces of my life.

Receiving her Indian name is also an important part of Ruth's new sense of self. With her new name, "Owl Woman", Ruth has begun to reclaim her native heritage and her sense of place in the world. The name was chosen for its power to evoke inner strength and protection. Ruth hopes that it will also be synonymous with and evocative of the wisdom she seeks in her life. Learning to live in the world as Ruth/Owl Woman is learning to live a new story - one of liberation and of wholeness - a new text for her life.

New Images of God

It is through our bodiliness that we must relate to God and to others. All our relationships are mediated through our bodies. Sexuality is our capacity for mutual attraction; the basis for our connection to all things and to one another as male and female. This inherent interconnectedness became more and more evident to Our Women as their process of recovering the lost parts of themselves unfolded. As relationship with and understanding of self changed so did relationship with and understanding of God. A changed self-image brought a changed God-image. So Ruth could say:

> It used to be that I took God really seriously. I certainly never could have joked with God. Now I can tell God funny things and I enjoy the humour more. Also I can laugh and feel joy. And I would never have thought of that as having to do with my relationship with God or being spiritual. But now I do.

Ruth's unidimensional understanding of God has given way to an appreciation of the complexity of the reality she calls God. No one image of God can capture who God is for her. God is Creator, Spirit Guide, Father, One, Holy Spirit, Son, Great Spirit, and expresses "masculine" and "feminine" attributes. For Ruth, Jesus shows the "nurturing God who cares and has time for children, who doesn't condemn women but treats them and children - not just men - with respect. Jesus is the God who cries when his friend dies." At other times, Ruth relates to God as her "guiding Spirit, my Spirit Guide" who assists her in times of difficulty, who wants good things for her and who urges her forward in her desire to "be the person I ought to be." When human language fails her and she cannot express her need, the Holy Spirit gives her voice and assists her in identifying her need and "what I need always seems to get done."

Mystery is the word that best describes Denise's image of God. That Mystery is seen to be an integral part of who God is and who Denise is. "That Mystery is in me and in my life." The Mystery was present in Denise's life "all along" but she "couldn't see it. I thought God had lost me but I had lost God so I felt lost." To see things as they really were Denise had to "open [her]self up to God. I had to let go of the resentment and the fear and the trying to figure out why things happened and make room for Mystery, the life force that is in everything..." Denise cannot "really explain the Mystery. It's not totally outside us but It is beyond our comprehension. It just *is*."

Mystery expresses Itself as "energy" which Denise says may also be called "grace". Energy/grace is what animates her life and "gives purpose and meaning to everything I do." Before, Denise thought of God as watching her "like a spy"; now God's watching is the expression of care and concern. Nor is God any longer the "old man with a beard in the clouds" but a living presence at the heart of existence, no longer "out there" as distant and removed but "within all that is."

Valerie, too, described the necessity of "opening [her]self up to God and allowing the presence of God to be within me." Such opening up filled Valerie with "such tremendous

joy, it was almost euphoric." Recognizing that God dwells within her has "grounded" Valerie. She's "not spaced out anymore. I'm no longer watching my life from a distance."

The practice of meditation helped Valerie to open up her life and to "find her centre - to become centred". Meditation helped Valerie to focus her energy and be mindful at a deep level - of her own body, of the world around her. It also brought an "intimate knowledge" of God's presence in her life and in "the life of the world". Reclaiming God "was really a celebration" for Valerie. For much of her life, she felt abandoned by God. But she discovered that "the Divine is always with us and presents us with opportunities to which we can respond or not."

Valerie's first tentative approaches to God were filled with anger. "I even swore at God and I learned that God allows us to do that...I didn't die or go insane. I was very much alive!" Gradually Valerie's understanding of God changed and, as this second half of her poem reveals, she realized that God was present in her life "always and gave me comfort" in ways she hadn't dreamed of:

> The inner voice said "Take the key.
> It's hidden deep inside your heart.
> Unlock the chains.
> Set your spirit free."
>
> A glimpse of God -
> In the face of my mate.
> In the faces of my babies.
> In the beauty of the world around me.
>
> A glimpse in my Mother.
> A sisterhood of women - celebrating change.
> Their courage leaves me speechless and humble.
> Their search, like mine, has been long and painful.
>
> My hands are *here*.
> Creating beauty.
> Tools for words, images.
> Tools for healing that which needs healing.
>
> Centring me to wholeness.
> Embracing the place where fear lives -
> Gently nudging it away
> To be purified and transformed.

Although the image of the Goddess is an important image in Valerie's conception of and relationship to the Divine, it is not sufficient in itself to define who God is for her. She believes that God is present in all things but cannot "simply be reduced" to created things.

For Valerie, God is the whole who is greater than the sum of the parts. God is not either/or but always both/and: God and Goddess, male and female, father and mother, friend and lover, brother and sister, immanent and transcendent, darkness and light. Without both/and Valerie believes that her relationship with God and God's relationship to the world would lose its balance and its mystery.

Many of the images Valerie has for God can be captured in the word "relationship". Relationship is also a key word in Hyacinth's understanding of God. She described God as someone "intimately connected to" her, someone who is "present in every breath...every moment" of her life, someone who "knows me intimately and loves me totally."

Hyacinth believes that she first needed to learn to "love the male image of God" as a kind of corrective to the negative view she had of males and of God. But her current view of God allows her to experience God in different ways at different times. Thus God can be experienced, among other ways, as "tenderness, forgiveness, joy, repentance, peace, awe, strength, light, power, conviction, discipline." Before the process of healing began in her life, "God was more 'out there'. I couldn't touch him or feel his presence. I spoke to God but he was stone deaf. But now God is part of me; God's Spirit is within me and guides my life."

Hyacinth had worked hard at making herself worthy of God's love by being "a performance oriented person." She thought she could "earn" God's love and become a "worthwhile, worthy person" by doing things perfectly. Hyacinth's preoccupation with perfection did nothing to change the negative view she had of herself. Instead, she came increasingly to view God as "task master". She thought she could love God by pleasing God and pleasing God was bound up in "doing things perfectly and obeying rules". What she now sees is that in "loving God", she "please(s) God" and her love of God motivates her to act in accord with that love. Hyacinth said that her new understanding has freed her of the feeling that she "could never do or be good enough" and has allowed her to "embrace life with joy and gratefulness."

A dialogue between Celie and Shug, principal characters in Alice Walker's 1982 novel, *The Color Purple,* came to mind as I reflected on Hyacinth's words because they seem to resonate well with her own:

> Us worry about God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like.
>
> You telling me God love you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?
>
> But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to. There's a lot of others things I can do that I speck God likes. (p. 176)

Like Shug, Hyacinth has discovered that "God calls [her] to live in a certain way" but that God's expectations of her are broad. As Hyacinth herself puts it: "God wants me to love myself, him, others and the world" and "glorify God in my work and in my way of life." Her current image of God allows her to do that in a way uniquely hers and also allows others to do so in their own way.

What Sofia has recovered is "the conviction and the wisdom that God can speak to us wherever we are and in whatever we're doing - all the time". Sofia's way of life has always been centred on prayer and, while prayer remains an important aspect of her relationship with God, she also sees that, for her, it had become "routine". She had also fallen into "the mistaken idea that I could find God's presence only in the church or when I was saying prayers - at all the 'expected' times." The experience of community, of falling in love, of being in touch with her body and her feelings taught Sofia that she "could not box God in. God would be revealed where and when God wanted. I began to experience God in the 'ordinary' things of life - a walk on a beautiful day or in the warmth and restfulness of a bath or in looking at a beautiful scene."

The punishing God who had been so present in Sofia's life has given way to the God who is love and the sure faith that God indeed loves her with "an unconditional love". It was", as Sofia says, "a slow process" which began with the experience of falling in love and being deeply loved in return. From that experience of human love, Sofia was able to recognize the "vastness" and "generosity" of God's love and to return that love. The "journey from the head to the heart", says Sofia, was one of the most difficult she had to make. At the same time, knowing God's love "not just in my head but in my heart" was one of her most profound spiritual experiences. From it Sofia learned that "it was not God who was punishing me - it was my own idea of God that punished me."

Her current idea of God is "much broader" than her old idea of God. Her old idea of God, like her old view of herself, was very constricted and didn't leave room for the complexity of self or God. Gone are the days of "one word descriptions" for God. Though Sofia knows that words will always be inadequate to describe God, male and female images help "enrich the whole idea of God" as do non-personal images "such as light, breath and spirit."

Spirit is an image of God that also speaks to Fiona. For her, the Spirit is in all things as the "force that unites all of creation". God's Spirit is

> at work in us even when we aren't consciously aware of it. It's what calls us to be more - to become more than we are now. The Spirit kept me alive when I was in unhealthy situations and relationships but I was unaware. Now I know the Spirit is the energy that guides my life and urges me forward.

Fiona has "always known the Great One" but she was only able to see his presence in her life retrospectively. "I know now the Great One was with me in my pain and suffered with me", says Fiona. Though the Great One was vulnerable to her pain, the Great One was not defeated. It was his life in her that enabled Fiona to overcome adversity "by giving me a means of coping with my everyday situation, by surrounding me and protecting the real me - the me that I was called to be but that I couldn't see in the pain and the loneliness of the abuse." Looking back over her personal history, Fiona recognizes that the Great One was present to her in her grandfather; in those who were kind to her; in those who offered support in difficult times; in her children; in moments of peace, beauty, insight; in the power that inspired the changes in her life and in the courage to enact them. The Great

One has all the qualities that "a good father should have; a good mother should have; a good friend should have, a good lover should have" and, in those relationships, the Spirit "reveals the Great One" who is "unconditional love."

The personal metaphors for God that Our Women have claimed describe God in terms of caring love. God is one who journeys with them in bad times as well as good - in suffering and in joy. Non-personal images point to God's presence as a guiding force and a strength that is beyond defeat. All of these images speak to Our Women's recognition of what Hyacinth described as "intimate connection to a God who is both immanent and transcendent."

Reconnecting with Others

Reclaiming their connection with others came as a "natural" and sometimes difficult consequence of Our Women's' transformed relationship with self and God. Reaching out to others came to be viewed as an "obligation that flows from my relationship with God" and as a necessary component of self. Our Women stressed the necessity of balancing the needs of others with their own needs. They spoke of the ongoing challenge that such balance presents. Denise observed that, as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and as a woman, she had always felt that looking after her own needs was "selfish." This sentiment was unanimous. On the other hand, Hyacinth observed, she did not want to go to the other extreme of "only looking out for number one." Looking out for number one, as Fiona and Sofia noted, is something that our culture of consumerism encourages. In Our Women's view, to be a "truly spiritual person", brings with it, among other things, "an obligation to bring healing to other people's lives." In addressing this issue, Ruth noted that self-healing and the healing of others are closely interwoven.

> As I see it, my being healed and living a more integrated life is beneficial to others. It seems to be a natural outcome. I've known some very bad experiences but I have also known healing. Because I'm where I am in my own life, I am more able to be open to the signs of need in others and to hear the pain of others...I don't see my role as an evangelist to go out and preach...My role is to bring healing to others in the everyday world where I live.

Ruth's sentiment was shared by the others. "Healing other people's brokenness"; "reaching out to others especially those who are poor or on the fringes"; "meeting the needs of others"; "holding others with dignity"; "challenging others to be the best they can be" were some of the ways Our Women expressed it. They did not see their other-directedness merely as "something nice" to do or as "a way to gain points" with others or with God. Rather, Our Women expressed it as an "ought" - as "a holy obligation"; as "an outcome of my relationship to God and to myself"; as "a requirement of the spiritual life"; as "one of the means by which I transcend myself"; as "an expression of our interconnectedness... God put us all in this together and we must care for one another."

Denise summarized it succinctly in ancient words now made her own: "Love God with all your heart and soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself."

Helping others, Our Women pointed out, does not mean "fixing things" for them or "glossing things over". Rather it means "to listen to", to "be patient with", to "challenge", "to pray for", to "walk with", "to be respectful of", "to show compassion for" others. It also means "to speak out against evils such as child abuse and poverty and racism and to do all I can to prevent the spread of evil in the world." As Sofia and Valerie put it, it is to address "evil" and "wrongdoing at their source."

Offering hope and being "a sign of hope" to others is also part of healing. One of the ways in which hope is engendered is through "telling healing stories". Ruth wants others to know from her life and from the lives of others that healing is possible. Does that mean that everything can be "changed" or "cured"?, Denise asked. Her answer is "No. Many things cannot be changed." People who have terminal cancer will usually not be cured. Houses and lands will be destroyed by floods and hurricanes and tornadoes. The child who drowns will not be brought back to life. Denise makes a distinction between "healing" and what she calls "curing". She points out that healing can happen to anyone regardless of the circumstances of their lives. Curing cannot: the dead will not be raised, the house destroyed will not be restored, the experience of childhood sexual abuse will not be eradicated from survivors' lives. But, as Hyacinth says, "We have a spiritual obligation to encourage people to face their pain and brokenness. That means we must walk with them through the fire and be a comforting presence to them in their lives". Such being-with-others and being-for-others is a necessary act in the process of transforming the world. Healing, says Denise, "is about lifting others up, letting them know they are not alone. It is sharing their pain and giving hope through comfort and support."

Another important facet of reconnecting with others was voiced by Fiona. She discovered that, in learning to accept herself and to see herself as she truly is, she was not unlike others - that she, too, could be nasty, uncaring, hurtful, mean, selfish. She needed to make changes in the way she treated others and in her negative attitude toward them. She noted, for example, that she had become very adept at manipulating people in order to get what she wanted from them. But she "realized that using people in that way is wrong and that neither I nor they can grow when I use people in that way. I have to treat people as more than objects to be used for my needs." Hyacinth, too, spoke of becoming aware "of my own sinfulness" and "my need for forgiveness and redemption." She went on to say that it was by "allow(ing) God's healing presence into my life" that "I eventually was able to forgive my abuser by seeing him as a sinner who is equal as I am before God...I now know there's a difference between blame and accountability." Sofia became aware of the way in which she, too, was responsible for the distance between herself and others. In particular, she noted how she had "been putting too much blame on others, especially my mother"; how she'd "been too harsh with her" and had "accumulated all this anger and was taking it all out on her." Valerie found that she had to "take the first step" toward repairing relationships with her children. In the process she had to "admit that they were abandoned and neglected" many times. These were not conscious acts on Valerie's part.

Nevertheless, she realizes that her acts brought unwanted consequences to her children and to her "husband who had to take on more than his share of responsibility."

Admitting their own weaknesses and failings and learning to forgive has brought new freedom to Our Women. As Hyacinth observed, "Life is hard but it's a lot easier when you don't have to be perfect." Our Women's own growth has brought "abundant blessings" to them and to others. Valerie's daughter has "found that she can come to me and we talk." Valerie has also been able to be more open, honest and emotionally available to her sons by first "admitting my shortcomings" to them.

Denise and her children have grown much closer. Denise believes that it "was by doing my own work that I freed my daughter and allowed her to let go of her Dad and her Dad to let go of her and let Dad be a Dad." The relationship between Denise and her husband is going through some difficult times. However, Denise is encouraged by her ability to be patient with herself and her husband in finding their strengths as a couple as well as a common meeting ground. At school, in her work with special needs children, Denise "has an obligation to treat those children with dignity...So I check things out at the end of each day: What kind of person have I been?...And perhaps I see I was out of line with someone so I go and do whatever is necessary to repair the harm I've caused."

Sofia is "more comfortable with " her mother now and recognizes that there is much good that she has received from her mother. She is learning to focus more on the positives, not in a "pollyanna kind of way" but by learning to let go of old wounds and being grateful for the good things in her life. She also sees herself as "now able to establish intimacy with others" including those in the religious community that is her family.

Hyacinth is less critical of others and realizes that she has "no right to judge others". She is able not only to give help to others but "can talk things out with others who are supportive and who can give me feedback. I'm no longer alone." Hyacinth has also reached out to those from whom she had been estranged and found a peace in forgiving and being forgiven. Among the most difficult but joyful reconciliations was one that came just two years ago when Hyacinth met her father for the first time in almost sixty years. Connecting with him was truly a coming home.

Working with their children and their grandchildren to "heal the rifts", to "build stronger connections" and to help instil a pride in their respective native heritages are some of the tasks that Fiona's and Ruth's reclamation process includes. There's a giving and a receiving , notes Ruth. "I reach out to others and they reach out to me. The difference now is that I can receive from others and ask for feedback from people whose judgement I trust."

In reestablishing connection with others, Our Women have come to an appreciation of the role that family, friends and others play in providing support, friendship and growth in all areas of their lives. Loneliness, depression, anxiety, apathy, isolation have been relieved and sometimes eliminated through connection with others. Recovering their ties with others has brought expectation and disappointment, joy and sorrow, hurt and healing, struggle and peace, solitude and solidarity. Through others, Our Women are given a "broader perspective on life and a better appreciation of self than can be obtained single-handedly".

Touching the World

Our Women found that reestablishing connection with themselves, others and God also meant being in touch with the world, the place wherein all social and intimate relationships occur. They pointed to the necessity of being aware of issues that affect all of us as citizens of the world and doing what we can - whether by "prayer", "educating others", "raising funds", "changing our attitudes", "promoting co-operative efforts", "appreciating diversity", "sharing resources", "encouraging the re-distribution of wealth", "welcoming newcomers to our country" -to make the world a better place in which to live.

They also spoke to the necessity of taking action at the local level to "promote justice and peace". Fiona commented on the enormity of the world's problems and the impossibility of reaching out personally to each and every part of the world. Nevertheless, she noted that this was cause for neither despair nor inaction. She, like the others, said there were many things that could be done at "the local level" to build "courage and hope". "We are all in this together", noted Hyacinth. Or as Valerie stated: "There is only one energy and it is in all of us and in all things...we are all connected." Whatever one person does affects the whole. Denise used the metaphor of a stone thrown in a pond to illustrate this interconnectedness and, as she said: "Even a small stone makes bigger and bigger circles."

Loving the Earth

All of Our Women expressed a renewed sensibility toward the earth and the need to care for the earth. Hyacinth said that when she had "finally been set free of the darkness of captivity" that sexual abuse had put her in, she "began to see the world with new eyes. The world took on new colours and I heard things in a way I hadn't heard them before. I literally woke up to the natural world." As a consequence of "waking up", Hyacinth is more conscious of the crisis our planet is in and of her "personal obligation" to promote efforts to "preserve the beauty and diversity" of the earth.

Denise, like Hyacinth, had a waking up to the natural world also. "I started to look at the flowers - I mean *really* look at them for the first time that I can remember in my life. I started to notice the beauty all around me and how easily we can destroy it through lack of attention and care... I, we, all of us have to take care of the earth and nurture it."

"Mother Earth" is another manifestation of God for Fiona. She "talks to" Mother Earth and "seek(s) her wisdom and guidance." Fiona also does her best to instil respect for the Mother Earth in her children and grandchildren as well as others by "teaching them through word and example not to be careless or to waste or pollute." Ruth, too, sees God present in "the earth and all of creation" and shares the sense of obligation that the others have spoken about. By "caring for the earth", by "really attending to the beauty of the earth" and doing her best to preserve it, Ruth feels her "connection with the earth is deepened - so is my connection to God and to all those others who share this world with me."

"Creation didn't really seem to enter into" Sofia's "old spirituality". In the past few years, Sofia has come to "include creation and my relationship to creation as part of my relationship with myself, others and God." This awareness has grown from within her as part of her own growth and has been strengthened and supported by "contacts with native spirituality and the ecology movement." On a practical level, Sofia says that she "doesn't take nature for granted anymore." And she has changed some of her habits as well: "I've been conserving water and energy. It's not done just to save on their usage but it's done also in solidarity with the whole world that needs to conserve and to share resources."

Valerie surrounds herself with things from the natural world - plants, shells, driftwood. She loves the skies and enjoys looking at the clouds and the stars. One of her favourite gifts from the earth is her love of stones. In holding a stone, Valerie feels its energy which is the energy of God and of everything there is. Without knowing it, Valerie has hit upon the same insight as the great mystic Julian of Norwich who, in asking herself what the small object she was holding in her hand might be, heard the answer "It is everything that is made." All of these things from the natural world, Valerie says, help keep her "grounded" - in touch with God, in touch with herself and in touch with the earth. "The world is just so beautiful", she says and we must all do whatever we can to preserve that beauty.

The interconnectedness between all things is something Valerie has "come to deeply appreciate." She spoke of how the earth "sustains us by giving us air and water", "provides our food", "supplies the materials we need to build our homes and to keep us warm", the earth yields the plants that provide "herbs and medicines" that preserve and restore our health. We, too, in our dying contribute the "matter of our bodies to enrich the soil from which new life will come." We each must do our part to "preserve", "care for", "heal" and "love the earth...Our interconnectedness to all life is essential and we have to honour that." Part of "honouring" is recognizing that "some things we've been doing are not good and are not working...the world in many ways is a filthy mess and we have to *do* something about it." Failure to do so is death to the earth and death to us all. Valerie admits she sometimes gets discouraged when she hears "news of another oil spill or when I'm talking to someone and they say it takes too much time to rinse out a tin can for recycling or to start a compost." But she believes there is still time to turn things around. "I do see other people starting to wake up...there are signs of hope."

Feeding the Source of Connection

Our Women talked about the care and attention that growth in the spiritual life requires. One of the most important dimensions of that care and attention, they noted, is the need for daily communication with the Holy. The hubbub of the everyday life "makes it difficult to hear God's voice". In order to hear that Voice, then, Our Women spend some time alone with God each day. Sometimes it may be only a "couple of minutes" and sometimes "the time is much longer." While spending "a couple of minutes" during the day to "commune with the Holy" might sound easy, Our Women assure us that it is not. It is easy to "find excuses" or "to spend time on other worthwhile pursuits" or "to forget if I

don't make it a conscious practice." Despite the difficulty, however, Our Women said that "making time" for what may be called "touching the Mystery" is crucial to their spiritual life.

Our Women do this in different ways at different times. Sometimes, it is through prayer. Prayer may be "just taking time at the beginning and the end of a day to thank God for giving us that day." Or prayer may be seen as a way of "drawing energy from the Source by quietly reminding myself that all that is comes from the same Source." It may be "reading a brief scripture passage and reflecting on what it might mean for my life right now." Sometimes prayer can be "saying a prayer" or "asking for guidance for my life or strength to live life with integrity." Prayer is talking *to* God rather than talking *about* God.

Hyacinth likens prayer to developing any close relationship. "If I say I love my husband and that he's really an important person in my life and yet, I never spend any time with him, then I'm living a lie. Being in relationship means we must find time on a regular basis to be with the one we love. That's what prayer provides in our relationship with God." Fiona used the analogy of sleep and food to talk about the role of prayer in her life. The body is nourished and energized by a regular supply of sleep and food. Prayer supplies "nourishment and energy for the heart and soul." Indeed, as Fiona adds, "it's even good for the body." With the words, "Take a radio station", Denise began to describe what prayer means for her life.

> There's unseen energy flying through the air all the time. Until you have a radio to tune it in, you don't hear it. God's presence is like that. It's all around us but until we pay attention - tune ourselves in - we miss it. Prayer is like fine tuning the frequencies. We keep turning the dial until we can hear clearly and to do that, we need silence and we need to go inside ourselves.

Another way to commune with the Holy is through meditation. Meditation helps remove all the distractions outside and inside oneself so that God may be heard "speaking from deep within." Valerie sees meditation as a way of "being still and meeting God in the stillness. In my centre." The stillness also allows Valerie's strengths "to come through and I'm better able to deal with the rest of my life in a calm and joyful way even when things aren't going particularly well." In the noise and the business of every day, Valerie "can't find the answers to [her] life and I lose sight of the connections...Even though I know God is all around us in the beauty of the world and even in the chaos, I find it harder to realize that when I'm in chaos myself." Through meditation the chaos is stilled: "I can let go of everything and let the quiet take hold of me and in that quiet I feel God's peace and love flowing into me in a special way."

Creating an atmosphere and a physical space that is conducive to prayer or meditation is also important. Fiona and Ruth use sweet grass as a vehicle for communication with God. Some of Our Women use drumming, music, dance and singing to assist prayer. Sometimes, these activities become the prayer. Valerie has a special room in her house that she uses for this purpose. Our Women also find that going to a church or to a park or

to some other place of retreat is helpful for creating the quiet needed to maintain a "focused attention" to and connection with the Holy.

Prayer and meditation and other ways of spending time alone with God allow Our Women to "bring God with [them] wherever [they] go throughout the day." This was an important change in their way of viewing spirituality. Denise's comment sums up this view: "I used to think that spirituality was something that I did in 'holy' places and at 'holy' times and then there was the rest of my life. I thought it was about following the rules." Now Our Women see spirituality as something that pervades the whole of their lives. "Spirituality is a way of living and being rather than something I do at special times or in special places." says Denise. "I carry God into school - in my being there with and for those kids. And I meet God in them." "The Spirit is at work" says Fiona, "in the ordinary wonders of everyday life. When I have a coffee with my husband or with my kids or when I'm doing something special like having this conversation with you." These ordinary everyday things are also the "stuff " of spirituality for Ruth: "Sometimes it's when I'm in need and I don't know who to turn to and I feel a connection to something greater than me. Or it could be when I see a beautiful sunset and I feel I connected with all my being to nature. Or it could be when I feel really close to another person. Everything; all of it is part of the spiritual." Hyacinth says that "God is present in all the healing things that we do for one another. Spending time with a friend or listening to someone's pain or visiting the sick or baking bread or preparing meals for the family. All of these things present an opportunity to bring God to others and to meet God in them."

Religion and Spirituality

Does religion have a place in the spirituality of Our Women? For Sofia, Hyacinth and Denise, religion involves membership in a particular church. Membership is not understood in a narrow sense of being part of an "in" group or a robot-like "following (of) the rules" or "getting saved." This is too narrow a conception and, in Denise's view, does not have much to do with God or others. "I've been there," she says "and I'm not going back." She is no longer interested in converting everyone. She recalled with great laughter how over-zealous she was when she first began to change.

> I started reading the bible...And I became a fanatic...I was reading this stuff all the time. I became the expert. I had a quote for every occasion and my family became sick of me. Oh yeah! I'd say I was addicted to religion at that point. I was still stuck in the rules. By doing all that somehow I would get saved. And I would get saved by converting everybody else. And it gave me a high. It gave me a big high. I was like an alcoholic. I needed that. I couldn't live if I didn't have that. I felt good for the first time in my life. I went from being worthless to being somebody and I think I became - I think this is the right word - grandiose.

What Our Women's membership in a particular church does mean is community and arises from a need to be connected to others who share a desire to live the Mystery and

what it means for their lives as "people of God." In this brief excerpt from *The Color Purple* Shug expresses the experience of Our Women:

> She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God.

Church is a way of "celebrating relationship" and of "being connected to God and others through that celebration," says Denise. It "is a reminder from inside myself as well as from outside through others to continually move beyond ourselves; to keep reaching out to the Mystery." The experience of community gained through membership in a church is, for Sofia, "a reminder that none of us is in this by ourselves. There is a personal and a communal dimension to it." The experience of church helps Hyacinth to grow in her spiritual life and to "become always more than I am." She believes that God is present in a special way in community because he promised that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst." The community called church gives Hyacinth "a sense of place and roots."

Religion supplies another critical dimension to the lives of these three Women. It gives them a way to deal with the mysteries that confront their lives and which cry out for meaning - life itself with its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, suffering, evil, death. As Denise put it: "Religion helps me make sense of it all." Does religion provide ready-made answers or answers that are definitive? No, says Hyacinth. Life is "always going to be full of woes and blessings." What religion does is help me to "not worry about it all. It helps me keep things in proportion."

Denise comments that her idea of spirituality and of religion are very close. This is also true for Hyacinth and Sofia. Both are about Mystery, the Ultimate, the Holy. Both provide a sense of what's important and what isn't. Both help keep things in perspective. Both are about relationship; about connection. But, says Denise, "I want flesh on my God. By that I mean I don't think I could keep things going entirely on my own. I need the visible example and the witness and the support of others." For these Women knowing that others also believe that there is "more to life than wealth and power and things", helps keep them from getting caught up "in stuff"; it helps keep balance in their lives. And praying together with others helps their personal prayer; it's an affirmation of the importance of prayer. The prayer of others is also a particular source of strength in their lives.

Denise and Hyacinth each told of how their respective church communities helped them deal with and heal from their sexual abuse by naming sexual abuse as an evil and by regularly including the healing of victims of sexual abuse in their public prayer. One church community periodically holds a special service of healing for victims of sexual abuse to which the entire church community is invited. "When they pray like that", says Denise "I feel embraced by love." And the communities to which each of these Women belongs have extended their support by offering financial assistance for therapy for victims of sexual

abuse who cannot afford such services themselves. Although their respective church communities do not know the personal stories of Hyacinth and Denise, they feel "lifted up" and "strengthened" by the actions of these communities. When the priest in her church first spoke about sexual abuse, Denise felt another crack of light come through the darkness. She described it as a "freeing" experience - the terrible secret had been exposed. There was no condemnation of the victim, no judgement, no formula for a quick or easy forgiveness. There was understanding and compassion and a recognition that forgiveness takes time. Hyacinth had a very similar reaction when her congregation began study groups that focus on healing, education and prevention. Participation in one of the groups helped Hyacinth place her "own experience of abuse into the larger context of my life." The compassion and love of God came alive through the compassion and love she experienced within the group. Others "are not the healers but the channels of it. They are God's hands and voice - God is made known through others."

In the Company of Women

Valerie's search for herself and for God brought her to women. Through the women Valerie has met, she feels she has learned how better to understand what the spiritual life means for her and how to deepen her spirituality. One of those women is the therapist she began to work with after she made the decision to "choose life." The therapist functioned as a teacher and guide in Valerie's life. She helped Valerie understand that power didn't have to a "bad word" but that it could mean "being your own person" and "making choices for my life" and "finding my strengths". She helped Valerie to face the darkness and to move through it. She challenged her to be more - to become more. Valerie said she thought that "confession for Catholics" must be "a lot like what therapy was for me." The therapist allowed Valerie to

> say this is who I am and to have that heard by someone else in a non-judgemental way. It was a very important part of my spiritual journey because it helped me to really look at myself and see what kind of person I was and to receive feedback and support to move closer to being the person I want to become. It was starting a new life - starting all over again - and making things right with myself and with God and with my family - with whomever and whatever I needed to do. It also helped me to put the various aspects of my life into perspective - to see where they fit into the whole rather than just looking at the bits and parts separately. It was a spiritual activity - it was about integration.

Another important woman in Valerie's life is the friend who taught her how to meditate, to listen to the stillness and the silence and not to be afraid of them. Mediation has since become one of Valerie's principal ways of developing her spirituality.

Another significant dimension of Valerie's spirituality is her membership in a women's circle. They get together to "celebrate life" and the changing of the seasons and the cycles of their own lives. "I couldn't call us witches," Valerie noted with a touch of humour. "We

aren't that sophisticated." Meeting together helps Valerie satisfy her need for connection and for support. There is dance and poetry and song and story. They each "have different gifts - some are in the arts; some are in science; others are somewhere else. But they are all parts that the whole has to have. When we come together, we each bring our unique gifts and energies to each other. Together we are more than any of us could ever be separately." Valerie and her daughter have also formed a deeper bond through the group. Together, she and her daughter led the group in a seed planting ceremony. "It was symbolic of birth and new life and a way of thanking Mother Goddess, Mother Earth for life and for the beauty and hope of spring." One of the things Valerie appreciates about the women in the group is that they do not engage in "pettiness". There is no criticizing the one who may be absent or putting others down. They offer support and practical help to everyone but especially to those, like a young mother with cancer, who are in special need.

Native Spirituality

Neither Fiona nor Ruth spoke at length about native spirituality. This was mainly because, although they are both native women, they had lost touch with their aboriginal traditions when they were still children. What they have both discovered is how important reclaiming their native heritage and spirituality is to reclaiming themselves. As neither of them lives in a native community, this is not an easy task. They seek out opportunities to become more connected to the native community through their work. Both have been involved in working with other natives in a teaching capacity. And each is now preparing herself through further study to have a more active role in assisting native peoples in their movement toward healing. Participating in native healing circles, sweetgrass ceremonies, sweat lodges and other spiritual traditions of native peoples is also an important aspect of their own spiritual development. What their native spirituality speaks most eloquently of is God's presence revealed in the world of nature. Through reconnecting with her tradition, Ruth finds confirmation of her own experience: "God is in the trees, the sun, the breezes, the water, the birds of the air." Said another way, "The Great One is near to us, surrounds us, is in us."

The Struggle Continues

The process of reclamation hasn't "solved" life for Our Women. They still wrestle with life and its mysteries. The questions continue to be asked and the journey "is never complete." Sometimes Our Women "grow by leaps and bounds", sometimes they "fall back into old habits and patterns", and at others times, they "seem to stay in one place for a while." As Sofia says "That's life." and "Life is hard," says Hyacinth. But saying that life is hard is "not a negative statement" but one that, once accepted, offers hope. That there is a "quick fix" or "an easy out" or a "magic" answer to life is a "deception", says Fiona, and "creates disillusionment with life". Hyacinth notes that it is a "false spirituality" that uses spirituality as "a crutch". It isn't enough to just sit there and wait thinking, "if I sit here long enough or say prayers enough, some magic is going to happen and my life will be

perfect. We have to be like the fellow in the Gospel and pick up our 'mats' and walk. God will provide all the help we need. But we've got to help ourselves, too." Valerie warns that "we can all be misled. One of the risks of opening myself up is that I leave myself open to things that are *not* good as well as to things that are good. That's one reason I need others - to help me to discern which is which. And that's also why I need silence and stillness."

What spirituality offers, in the words of Our Women is "perspective", "proportion, "meaning", "direction" and "hope" for their lives. Fiona reminds us "this isn't heaven. And some days are sunshine and some days are rain. But now I have a reason to live and a reason to get up every day. I'm here for a purpose and there's something that I have to do."

Our Women's description of their changed lives once again brought me back to a conversation between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*. Celie, like Our Women, was a victim of child sexual abuse. Exploited by her father and by other men, Celie was disillusioned with life and its pain. She stopped writing to God because, for her, "he is just like all the other mens I know - low down, forgitful and cheatin." Celie's life began to turn around, however, when she was befriended by Shug, a vital, caring woman. Shug shared with Celie how her understanding of God had changed over the years from an image of an "old white man up in the sky" to the life-giving force present in everything:

> Shug, a beautiful something, let me tell you. She frown a little, look out cross the yard, lean back in her chair, look like a big rose.
>
> She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I laughed, I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it. It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh.
>
> *Shug!* I say
>
> Oh, she say. God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like.
>
> God don't think it dirty? I ast.
>
> Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love - and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration.
>
> You saying God vain? I ast.
>
> Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. (p.203)

What Our Women have learned is that achieving wholeness and holiness necessitates travelling over and living through the difficult turf of real life with its challenges and crises. The journey is one that will not be completed in this life. But, as they discovered, the journey is one which they do not travel alone. The Mystery is always with them and, in countless ways, "strengthens [them] inwardly through the power of the Spirit" so that they

may "attain all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3: 16; 19). For "In the beginning everything was in relationship and in the end everything will be in relationship again. In the meantime, we live by hope."

CHAPTER 8

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

> It is good to have an end to journey towards; but it is the journey that matters in the end.
>
> (Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

> We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.
>
> (T.S. Eliot)

> The world is round and the place which may seem like the end may also be only the beginning.
>
> (Ivy Baker Priest cited in The Beacon Book of Quotations by Women)

Introduction

With this final chapter, this study comes full circle. The question which initiated the study is once again our focus. In this chapter, the question will be re-examined in light of the theoretical and research perspectives out of which it emerged. Toward the end of the chapter, the question will be put forth for the consideration of therapists, clergy and religious educators and spiritual directors.

Links to Theory and Research

The central question of this study arose out of my clinical and personal need to understand the nature of the impact that the experience of childhood sexual abuse has upon the spiritual development of adult female survivors. Chapter 2 presented a summary of the literature on child sexual abuse and its general impact on survivors' lives. It also provided a summary of some perspectives on spirituality and spiritual development. Spiritual development was presented within the wider context of human development of which it is an integral part. The existing literature on sexual abuse, as we saw, makes few references to its impact on survivors' spiritual development. Where the spiritual impact is addressed, the lived experience of that impact is almost entirely absent. This study, therefore, used hermeneutic-phenomenolgy as the frame within which to explore the possible meaning of spirituality in the lives of adult female survivors.

No one's life is exactly like another's as the stories of Denise, Fiona, Hyacinth, Ruth, Sofia and Valerie demonstrate. Each of Our Women is unique, and how her life exemplifies and illumines the question under investigation is also unique. The themes that emerged from each Woman's individual life experience were laid open in order to reveal their meaning. The search for an understanding of Our Women's experience revealed that it is much broader than the unique meaning of their individual lives. However, it was the

exploration of the individual lives of Our Women that brought the broader dimensions to light.

Hermeneutic-phenomenology allowed the in-depth exploration of lived experience to take place through conversations with these six women - Our Women. The conversations with Our Women have opened up ways of understanding the nature of the impact that this traumatic childhood event can have on female survivors' spirituality. The conversations, which gave rise to stories, have also given us a glimpse into the meaning of spirituality for Our Women's lives and of how changing notions of self, God and other, though they may seem separate, are inextricably interwoven. In the end, the text presented here does not provide a final list of incontrovertible "facts". No definitive conclusions have been drawn. No hypotheses have been confirmed or disproven. No specific theoretical positions have been overturned. Instead, an interpretation has been offered as a basis from which to consider and broaden our understanding of the impact of sexual abuse upon survivors' lives. Returning to the beginning, then, we will consider again some of the perspectives that were summarized earlier so as to better understand Our Women's experience.

Disconnection from Self

Jordan (1991) notes how important relationships are in fostering women's sense of self. Gilligan's (1982) view, similar to that of Surrey (1991) and Jordan (1991), is that women's sense of self cannot be isolated from the quality of their emotional connections and interactions with others. Surrey (1991) summarizes the basic elements of what she calls the "core self" in women as:

> (1) an interest in and attention to the other person(s), which form the base for the emotional connection and the ability to empathize with the other(s); (2) the expectation of a mutual empathic process where the sharing of experience leads to a heightened development of self and other; and (3) the expectation of interaction and relationship as a process of mutual sensitivity and mutual responsibility that provides the stimulus for the growth of empowerment and self knowledge (p.59).

Surrey's conclusion is that women's self develops in the context of relationships where the desire to understand is as essential as the desire to be understood. Hence, she speaks not so much of self as of "self-in-relation" (p.59). Surrey's conclusion is consistent with that of Jossleson (1987) who stated that it is with "communion, connection, relational embeddedness..." that "women construct their identity" (p. 191).

Our Women's histories were ones in which the development of a clear self was difficult indeed. Several authors including Briere (1992), Courtois (1988), Herman (1992) and McCann and Pearlman (1990), Siegel (1995) have addressed the difficulty that those who have been abused early in life have in developing a sense of self. McCann and Pearlman note that working through trauma is a "complex interplay between life experience (including personal history, specific traumatic events, and the social and cultural context) and the developing self (including self capacities, ego resources,

psychological needs and cognitive schemes about self and world)" (p.6). Drawing on various theoretical perspectives, including object relations theory, self psychology and developmental psychology, McCann and Pearlman define the self as a complex reality made up of (a) basic capacities that operate to preserve identity and self-esteem, (b) resources that regulate connection with others, (c) psychological needs that motivate behaviour, and (d) beliefs and suppositions through which experience is interpreted.

Our Women grew up in homes where early and persistent disconnection from family members was a common feature. One of them felt she was more responsible for her mother than her mother was for her. Relationships with mothers, grandmothers, fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands and trusted family friends (who functioned as part of an extended family) were often associated with sexual abuse, neglect and abandonment.

In order to develop a sense of self, Miller (1988) stresses how important it is for the child to have relationships that are mutually affirming and which also allow her to claim her autonomy. In the experience of sexual abuse, the child has neither. In unresponsive environments such as Our Women described, they made themselves into the persons they believed they had to be in order to receive acceptance and a hoped for sense of worthiness and value. The repeated references by Our Women of the need to be "perfect" and to do things "perfectly" is testimony to their deep sense of self-blame and lack of acceptance for who they were. It was also a way of maintaining the hope that someday they might be forgiven and loved by others and by God.

The first of Erikson's eight developmental stages addresses the child's need to learn trust. Usually this is done in the context of the child's first encounter with parents who through reliability, consistency and predictability in their interactions with the child establish the foundation of trust that is necessary for secure attachments, ego development and the formation of a sense of self. For most of Our Women, their early interactions with parents did not lay the necessary foundation for the development of trust. Our Women were unable to rely upon those closest to them to provide the stability, assistance and confirmation as persons that they needed. Lack of nurturing, the sense of abandonment and betrayal and their unmet dependency needs resulted in a lack of trust in self, a lack of trust in others, a lack of autonomy, hope and love - all of which are foundational to spiritual development (Fowler, 1981; Genia's Stage I). Lack of trust in others extended to lack of trust in God and to a lack of trust in a benevolent universe. Our Women's early abusive interactions with trusted care-givers and others fostered beliefs and expectations that others, including God, could not be relied upon.

Herman (1992) and Sargent (1989) both speak to the difficulty the child encounters in trying to form attachments and to develop trust with negligent and abusive care-givers. The abuser and other trusted adults who fail to protect her are absolved of responsibility for the abuse (Briere, 1992; Dolan, 1991) and the child concludes that she is bad. Courtois (1988) suggests that sexually abused children receive the message "Be ashamed of yourself. You are to blame for everything" (p.45) from family members. The message confirms what she has concluded about herself. She believes that it is her badness that causes the abuse and that makes her deserving of punishment. Our Women felt an elemental sense of badness, shame and unworthiness which they carried with them into

adult life as core to their identity and their personal story. They felt abandoned by those closest to them and by God. They saw their abuse and many other negative experiences as punishment, justly deserved, from God (Genia's Stage II).

The sense of self is inextricably bound up with relationship to others. Our Women had long-standing difficulties in interpersonal relationships and in establishing intimacy. Feelings of isolation and of disconnection established in childhood extended into adulthood. Some of Our Women established very rigid boundaries between themselves and others thus deepening their sense of disconnection. Others had difficulty establishing any boundaries and sexualized all relationships which increased their sense of loss of self. Difficulties in establishing appropriate boundaries between themselves and others can also be seen in Our Women's difficulty in caring for themselves. They felt required to look after the needs of others and an inability to say "No" to any demands on them from others. In a sexually abusive situation, the child is required to look after the needs of the adult at the expense of herself. Additionally, women's socialization has encouraged them to place others' needs before their own (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976).

When the sexual abuse became too much to bear, some of Our Women learned to dissociate. In so doing their sense of self was further weakened as was their sense of attachment to physical reality. By definition a dissociated state is one in which connection is absent. Some of Our Women functioned in this manner well into their adult lives whenever they were under stress or when the dynamics of abuse (e.g., imbalance of power; lack of control) were present in other relationships or situations.

The importance of the development of a sense of self is a central one to understanding Our Women's spiritual development. Development of the self is the foundation upon which all other relationships are built. The experience of self is of critical importance to all experiences of relationship including one's experience of God. As Rahner (1978) noted, the experience of self and the experience of God are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Change in the experience of self affects the experience of God and also the experience of others.

A Holistic View of Spirituality

In our increasingly technological world, the cry for holistic approaches to human life can be heard from many quarters. We hear of holistic approaches to education, to medicine, to psychology. What holistic approaches to these various fields hold in common is an emphasis on the total person, on the need to maintain the integral unity of mind and body, and on the need for balance between the various aspects of the human person (physical, emotional, affective and so on). A holistic spirituality is one that is also mindful of the ongoing need for wholeness, for integration and for balance and the developmental nature of human growth. A holistic spirituality engages the entire person in the process of personal transformation (Genia, 1990). And, as Our Women's lives show, it is not primarily or mainly about uncritical assent to intellectual truths (Genia's Stage II) nor is its scope restricted to the cultivation of "me, my soul and God" which some past and present spiritualities seem to foster. Rather, a holistic spirituality is a way of being in the world

that embraces the whole of life (Genia's stage V). Recognizing this, Our Women were able to free themselves of their earlier notions that the only places, times and activities that were sacred were those that were explicitly named as sacred and came to see that where we are is indeed "holy ground."

Our Women's earlier God images saw God as a stern judge ready to pounce. Such a view robbed Our Women's lives of any joy or spontaneity. The rigid adherence to church rules and blind obedience to those in authority by some of Our Women and/or to a literal interpretation of scripture by others (Genia's Stage II), perpetuated passivity and a childish subordination to others. For one of Our Women, these attitudes were more firmly established by her choice of vocation to a life where she was not required to think for herself or to make choices. Later she would note that she was tired of being " a child of God" and wanted now to be "an adult of God."

The journey to wholeness, integration and balance is a lifelong one. For Our Women, that journey reached a moment of crisis (Genia's Stage III) during the period of their lives that we generally refer to as mid-life. Recall that Genia points out that, while Stage III "usually begins in adolescence, for some individuals it may occur much later" (p.91). The crisis presented Our Women with a tremendous challenge. In responding to the challenge, Our Women were stepping on the edge of a slippery precipice for, as the Chinese character for the word crisis reminds us, it is both a hidden opportunity and a danger. The danger is that, if misguided, growth may be stunted. It is easy to want to shelter oneself in a safe harbour and to escape the struggle that all growth requires. But Our Women chose the opportunity to enter the darkness, to face the struggle and, in so doing, emerged with a sense of themselves as more integrated, more whole, more balanced human beings (Genia's Stage IV).

One of the things that assisted Our Women on their journey was having a guide particularly during the period of crisis and for some time thereafter. Genia's (1990, p.91) recognition of the need for a "great deal" of support is confirmed by the experience of Our Women. Initially, Our Women's chief guide came in the person of a therapist. Later, for Denise, Sofia and Hyacinth, guidance was also provided by "spiritual directors." Their respective guides assisted Our Women by helping them to wrestle with their demons and to move forward despite the pain of the struggle. The guides did not provide answers or assist Our Women to skirt the natural path of development but were available to support, challenge, direct and rejoice with Our Women as their journey progressed.

In the beginning, Our Women's experience of sexual abuse gave them a view of themselves that was static and limited. They tended to view the various parts of themselves as unrelated rather than seeing themselves as a single entity. They were also constrained by a largely stereotypical view of what was appropriate to them as female. What they discovered in mid-life is that their limited notions of themselves were too confining; that they, as human beings, are complex and multifaceted. As new dimensions (I am lovable, I am good, I am capable, I have weaknesses, I am limited) of themselves gradually came to light, they demanded to be recognized and given their rightful place. The old limited view of self needed to be broken down and a more encompassing and complex view of self - one that allowed room for the integration of the newly discovered

parts of self - needed to be built. Our Women's new sense of self allowed them to accept all of themselves (Genia's Stage IV) rather than claiming some parts as good and others parts as not-so-good (Genia's Stage I). In acquiring this more expansive and multifacted self, Our Women were also able to shed their view of themselves as "victim." Using Kegan's model, we can say that they were able to move out of the embedded culture or holding environment they were in through a shift in self-consciousness. Rather than continuing to say, "I *am* my abusive experience.", they could now say, " I *had* an abusive experience."

On the surface, such a shift might seem easy. But the movement out of the old self and into a new one was scary. It shattered Our Women's sense of who they were, precipitating crisis and creating disequilibrium (Genia's stage III). In Piagetian terms, Our Women's conflict arose because the schemas they had about themselves were being torn down, taking with them what was familiar. In this process of breakdown, there was confusion and uncertainty. The developmental movement forward required them to live with the pain of that confusion and uncertainty. But moving forward is not a given. Our Women could have clung to the old restricted self by denying the newly discovered dimensions of self their place, thereby preventing a new self from being born. By choosing to open themselves up to include the new dimensions of self, Our Women allowed a new, more expansive self to emerge. Their conversion moved them from self-deprecation to self-appreciation. In psychological terms, it was expressed in their growing acceptance of themselves as good, capable, lovable, important, useful, etc. and in their understanding that it is okay to have needs and to meet those needs. Our Women's recognition of their goodness freed them from the compulsive need to please others or to prove themselves as a means to making themselves worthwhile (moving out of Genia's Stage II). Eventually, they realized that their worth came from their radical goodness as creatures made in the image of God and not from their achievements. They also discovered the need for less activity and more contemplation - for journeying and staying at home. Their prayer and meditation reminded them that it is not enough to settle for what is available in the present, good though it may be. Our Women spoke of the need to be continually open to the Mystery in their lives and to the mystery of themselves. Such an openness entails a constant striving for self-transcendence and for the "More" that is always potentially available. Such radical openness also involves trust in the Mystery which, Our Women discovered, is always and everywhere present (Criterion 5 of Genia's Stage V).

Our Women's stories show that the development of a mature spirituality is not counter to healthy human development (Genia, 1990, p. 96) and those who strive to be spiritually mature are not exempt from the human condition. It is their human struggle which provided the context for their continuing growth in wholeness and holiness. It was in taking the risk to open themselves up, to expand themselves as human beings that Our Women were able to free themselves of the numbness and isolation of their lives and to reestablish the connections to self, others, God and the world that they so needed. Healthy love for and acceptance of self and a letting go of excessive self-blame and guilt (Genia's Stage IV) enabled Our Women to go beyond themselves and to remove the barriers that separated them from others and from the world. Conversion, then, did not only bring

about a change in Our Women's relationship to self but necessarily brought a new relationship with others, the world and God. Concern for others is reflected in Our Women's desire to reconcile themselves with those in their immediate circle from whom they were estranged or distant. It is also seen in their desire to be channels of healing to all those with whom they come in contact - in their local communities, through their work. It extends also to a concern for the suffering peoples of the world and to issues of poverty and justice that have global significance. And it expresses itself in an ecological consciousness and efforts to conserve and reclaim the world's resources (criterion 7, Genia's Stage V).

To paraphrase St. Irenaeus, "the glory of God is the human person fully alive". In committing themselves to their ongoing development as human persons, Our Women are also committing themselves to continuing spiritual development. Indeed, it may be said that their commitment to growth is not only a choice but a requirement of their spiritual development. The effort at continuing personal development may be expressed as an answer to a call from God to be co-creators of their lives or as Fiona put it, "I realized that God wanted me to grow." This sentiment is congruent with Genia's (1990) conclusion that a person's spiritual functioning "is interdependent and generally congruent with other facets of a person's personality" (p.96). Thus, a person's spiritual functioning "provides important clues to [her] overall psychological functioning" (p.96). To be human is to struggle and any spirituality that is not built out of that struggle is likely to be hollow and escapist - the psychologically unhealthy spiritual outlook of James' (1958) "once-born."

The old Scholastic adage, "grace builds on nature," is another way of saying that spiritual development relies on human development. We cannot start at the goal, we can only start where we find ourselves. Authentic spirituality can only exist in the context of an authentic human life and thus with the individual's strengths and weaknesses, emotional maturity and her uniqueness as a person. Our Women's struggle to find meaning and wholeness out of their experience of childhood sexual abuse was also the struggle that led them to a deeper and more mature spiritual life. What Our Women discovered was that God was not indifferent to their suffering but was intimately involved in the struggle with them. At the same time, they also realized that God was not limited to nor overcome by the struggle thus creating in them a basis for hope. Nor could God be limited to any particular image. While many images help enrich the idea of God, they will never adequately explain Our Women's experience of God.

Our Women see their experience of sexual abuse as having had a profound impact on their spirituality. The experience of sexual abuse left each of them with a negative view of self, of her body, of others and of God. At different times and to different degrees, their deep sense of disconnection left Our Women feeling isolated, without any sense of purpose in their lives, without a feeling of "I matter", "I am valuable", "I am lovable and loved", without direction, without any motivation to change, without belief that things can be better, without joy or gratitude or hope.

How Our Women view their experience of sexual abuse now is different from how they once saw it. Without doubt, the experience is one that each Woman clearly would prefer not to have undergone. But it is no longer the defining experience of their lives or

the "filter" through which their lives are viewed. No longer do they see it as a punishment from God or as confirmation of their worthlessness or as something for which they themselves were responsible. No longer is God seen as having "allowed" or "willed" the sexual abuse to happen. Instead, responsibility for the abuse has been laid with the offender where it rightly belongs. Paradoxically, giving responsibility for the abuse back to the offender - holding him or her accountable - has made forgiveness possible (Criterion 8, Genia's stage V).

For Our Women, the experience of sexual abuse is one that initially sent their spiritual development on an errant path. It drew them away from healthy, life-giving relationship and entrenched them in a negative view of the world. The impact of their experience did not end there, however. An equally important part of the impact was Our Women's struggle to come to terms with their experience, to heal their torn-to-pieces-hood , to find new meaning in their lives and, in so doing, to transcend the negative impact. Their yearning for wholeness led them on a journey of healing. The journey, which is ongoing, has been very difficult at times but, for each of Our Women, it has led to a radical redefinition of self, God and others. It has also led to a deep appreciation for life and discloses itself as a concern for and a belief in the interconnection and interdependence of all things - in relationship. It is a journey that, Thomas Moore (1992) says, requires "time, effort, skill, knowledge, intuition, and courage. It is... process - alchemy, pilgrimage, and adventure - so we don't expect instant success or even any kind of finality. All goals and endings are heuristic, important in their being imagined, but never literally fulfilled" (p. 259).

Considerations for Therapists

> Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.
>
> (Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*)

Stories are all around us - in the news, in conversation, in movies, on television, in books. Some sadden us, some inspire us, some prod us, some challenge us, some delight us. Some touch us deeply, change us and bring us closer to others and to ourselves. The stories of Our Women - of Denise, Fiona, Hyacinth, Ruth, Sofia and Valerie - evoked all these movements in me. Their stories are sacred stories.

Not all stories are sacred. As the Simpkinsons (1993) observe "Some stories are bawdy, some are silly, some can even be immoral" (p. 1). What makes a story sacred, they suggest,

> has to do not so much with the *content* of the story but with the *process the story ignites*. Sacred stories move us; they get us thinking about what is important; they communicate through symbol and metaphor deep truths about the mysteries of life. Upon hearing a sacred story, even if we don't understand the message intellectually, we are aware that some profound lesson has been imparted (p. 1. Italics added).

What Our Women's stories suggest is that everyone has a relationship with the divine. This fact is not altered by saying "I don't go to church or I don't believe in God." All of us are faced with the "big" questions and issues of life; we all experience ourselves as threatened, welcomed, abandoned, rejected or loved. It is in these experiences, revealed in the context of our stories, that our relationship with the divine is discerned. As Our Women have shown, stories about relationships with the divine that are rooted in fear of perpetual judgement or abandonment can be questioned and undermined. Implicit in this movement is the assumption that some stories are healthier and more life-giving than others. As Price and Simpkinson (1993) put it, "Self-acceptance is preferable to self-denying guilt, and openness in the face of fear brings better results than yielding to the need to control" (p. 26). We can revisit our own stories and, in a refining process based on whether or not they are healthy and life-giving, we can reject, rewrite or reclaim them.

What Our Women's stories also show is that the sacred or the spiritual is not confined to "God-talk" nor is the person adept at "God-talk" *necessarily* genuinely spiritual. Many people are genuine - they are what they seem; their talk and who they are form an integrity. Others are more spiritual than first glance encounters would reveal. Perhaps the person who distances herself from institutionalized expressions of religion, who does not read the Bible and avoids other obviously "spiritual/religious" things is animated by a spirit of awe and wonder, openness to life, genuine caring and so on which reveal a deep spirituality. And others prove less genuinely spiritual than they first appear: those, for example, whose "spirituality/religiosity" reveals itself in "moralistic and condemnatory judgements of those with different beliefs and ideologies" (Genia, 1990, p. 89) than their own or in the maudlin confessions of the televangelist preacher whose fraudulent financial dealings have been exposed or in "the patronizing smile of those too sure they're saved" (Ruland, 1994, p. 2). We need to go deeper than the surface and see what it is that ultimately underlies the life of a person or a community; what truly animates them - and ourselves.

Throughout this text, no line has been drawn between the "sacred" and the "profane". Whatever lines Our Women once drew have been removed. Instead, there is an acknowledgment

> that when we find the transcendent written across the cosmos in all its awesomeness and glory we find it is immanent - within us - written on our hearts. It is an epiphany of oneness with the seamless whole of all that is (Hague, 1995, p.299).

Ruland (1994), expressing a similar thought, notes that some may feel that locating the spiritual everywhere

> looks suspiciously like locating it nowhere. But devout Hasidic Jews find even the study of mathematics an act of worship. An Australian aborigine links sacred originating forces "once upon a time" with every meaningful act performed in the present, whether hunting, mating, or sleeping. Zen enlightenment means being

> intensely present in each commonplace event - when you're drinking tea, nothing is more important than drinking tea. (p. 3).

The Process of Therapy

One might well ask, "what's all this got to do with therapy?" Therapy is a story-telling process. People go to therapists essentially to tell their stories. As therapists, we have been taught to listen to those stories with "psychological" ears. If patients wish to have their stories heard from a "spiritual" perspective, they are often sent to a minister or a "spiritual" director or perhaps even a guru or shaman. What I'm suggesting is that such dichotomizing deprives everyone of the larger, more inclusive view of human experience that a synthesis of these pathways may provide. Carl Jung (1933) and, more recently, Thomas Moore (1992) defined the art of therapy as part of a broader cure and care of the soul. Although the therapist, the minister and the shaman represent three distinct vocations their distinctions converge whenever

> someone strives to heal, not just as a specialist, but as a complete human being. What distinguishes one particular healer from another is less important than the common vision that unites them. At best, they share a comprehensive healing ideal, wide enough to interweave every possible source of insight and care (Ruland, 1994, p. 129).

Anyone who appreciates the complexities of the art of communication realizes the basic ambiguity that the speech of any one, perhaps especially one who seeks the counsel of a therapist, may contain. Granted, speech may be precisely and narrowly what it appears to be. Yet the possibility remains that something deeper resides beneath and beyond the surface of the utterances. As has been discussed, the spiritual is integral to human development and helps constitute the roots of self-fulfillment and self-transcendence. The spiritual can often be found lurking behind or hidden within a language that appears not to contain it. Therapists, in assisting patients in their journey to wholeness, integration and higher consciousness, can deepen that process by attending to the integration of the spiritual that is revealed beneath and within what is popularly conceived of as secular (or profane) language.

This is not a task for the faint of heart or the wishy-washy. Often in life, and, as Our Women's lives reveal, especially in moments of crisis, people seek a place of sanctuary and a trustworthy guide for spiritual relief. In such a place and with such a person, the patient (meaning "one who suffers") hopes to find and, indeed must find, acknowledgement and support which invites examination of their customary self-images, testing of new images of self and of others and perhaps inspiration - the beginning of transformation. As we have seen with Our Women, once people become aware of the stories that direct their lives and which undergird their values, they have already initiated the first step toward liberation. Then the difficult work of transformation begins in earnest - the process of testing out and of discerning what to affirm, what to discard and what to reclaim. The work of

transformation can sometimes be a slow and painstaking process and, therefore, requires a great deal of patience from both the therapist and the patient.

In the process of transformation, patients need to "clarify and reaffirm their own centre" (Ruland, 1994, p. 121) of spiritual meaning. Patients also "have the right to count on a reciprocal gesture from the mature therapist - a continuous process that...is an evolving awareness and self criticism of one's own [spiritual] premises" and especially their impact on individual patient's lives. The mature therapist is one who can balance with care both "engagement and disengagement" or more precisely, "the therapist-observer enlists the client-observer to interpret what both of them experience as mutual participants in the therapy" (p. 123). The mature therapist, in recognition of his or her need for on-going self-therapy, will seek "lifelong supervision and consultation with colleagues" (Ruland, p. 121). Although Genia (1990) is not speaking in the context of therapy. she does point out that openness to diverse points of view is critical to mature spirituality as a way of expanding the "boundaries of one's own understanding" of spiritual truth (p. 94). What is good for the patient is also good for the therapist and helps the therapist to be genuinely empathic, that is, to transcend his or her own boundaries, which Genia would see as another hallmark of the spiritually mature individual.

Working With Patients Who Are Affiliated With a Particular Religion

Therapists would do well to have some familiarity with a patient's religious affiliation and the support it offers to that patient. Therapists must also pay attention to and affirm the appropriateness of questions, comments and concerns that arise out of the patients' religious belief, exploring their importance for that patient. Consultation with a pastor or spiritual director whom the therapist knows and trusts will help him/her deal with those patient concerns with which s/he feels uncomfortable or unfamiliar. With the patient's permission, the therapist can also establish contact with individuals, such as a pastor or spiritual director, whom the patient sees as playing a supportive role in her life and with whom she might explore those concerns which arise out of her religious tradition. Such contacts will also provide the therapist with insights into questions such as whether or not the pastor is familiar with common issues of adult survivors; is supportive of therapy; is working with the patient in ways that enhance or impede the therapy; is open to the religious/spiritual questions of the patients in ways that encourage the patient's spiritual development.

Jakubiak and Murphy (1987) recommend that therapists examine their own beliefs while warning that such excursions might be painful and "may threaten long-held notions of social and divine order" (p. 22). Therapists need to be aware of their own spirituality and understanding of suffering and meaning. It is not necessary for the belief system of the therapist and patient to be identical. If the therapist's spirituality and belief system are antagonistic to that of the patient, however, conflict will ensue. In such a case, it is best that the patient be referred to a therapist whose views are more congruent with her own and with whom she can work more successfully.

The Use of Stories

Therapeutic approaches such as hypnosis and guided imagery attest to the value of story as a medium for human change and growth. Ruland (1994) also suggests that both therapists and patients can increase their empathic capacities and also expand and recognize their own stories in the lives of fictional characters. He notes that good fiction writers in tune with the inner life can stretch us so that we may recognize the extraordinary inner life of ordinary people. As well, the complex landscape of the disturbed lives of William Faulkner's or Fyodor Dostoevsky's or William Styron's characters can give us a window through which to view our own lives. In moments of empathic communication, be they with real patients or with the imagined characters of a book, we also touch the sacred in recognition of our own need, too, for help.

Recent research by psychotherapist Daniel Siegel (cited in Psychology Today, January/February 1995, p. 85) has shown that the ability to engage in autobiographical narrative is thwarted in those who suffer childhood trauma like that of Our Women. Hence, as we have already seen, their sense of self is impoverished. What Siegel suggests is that we teach people to tell stories about their lives so as to help them develop a richer sense of self. In so doing we help them to "make meaning out of life" (p. 85). Meaning-making is what spirituality is also about. The meaning-making process, says Siegel, "Is shaped by who we are as self" (p. 85) and sacred stories "illumine that mysterious and precious 'self' at the centre" (p. 85) thus making it come alive.

Telling a Larger Story

Critics of psychology have suggested that psychology simply assists people to cope with an existing social structure that may be inherently unjust and thereby a root cause of the need for which people seek the counsel of psychologists. Psychology tries to change the individual while perhaps leaving the social order unchanged. Indeed, it could be argued that psychology even contributes to the preservation of the social order which may be creating suffering among individuals. It might also be said that, in encouraging personal change in individuals, therapists hope the social order will change.

In reference to child sexual abuse, the subject of this study, there is a social order that has resulted in serious, damaging impact on the development of those sexually abused as children. The incidence of this injustice is alarming. It becomes incumbent on those of us who offer assistance to victims to consider our historical and moral responsibility to contribute toward changing the social conditions that contain this threat to children.

In a recent book entitled *Writings for a Liberation Psychology,* author Ignacio Martin-Baro (1994) challenges psychology to consider its activity and the role it carries out in society. Although he is speaking specifically to the South American context, his ideas have relevance for psychology in the context of child sexual abuse as well as in the wider arena of issues that psychology seeks to redress especially in these times of unprecedented economic restraint and social unrest. He states that the critical questions that psychology must frame with regard to its activity and role in society

should not be centred on *where* the work is done, but rather on *by whom;* nor should it be looking at *how* something is done, so much as *for whose benefit*. Thus, what is at stake is not so much the kind of activity that is practiced (clinical, educational, industrial, community or other) as *what are the concrete historical consequences* this activity is producing? (p. 45)

Clearly those involved in the work of psychology are not called upon to solve all the problems of society. With respect to child sexual abuse, it is not in therapists' hands as therapists to change the structural and social mechanisms that allow child sexual abuse to occur. It is within our realm, however, to intervene in the personal and subjective processes that maintain those structures. Thus, we can help find avenues for assisting people to treat one another with respect and dignity - for humanizing relationships; for replacing violent habits with non-violent ones and for fostering love and hope in life.

Considerations for Pastors and Religious Educators

Child sexual abuse is a serious social problem. It is also a problem of justice - of establishing right relationship. Churches have both a unique opportunity and a duty to be places of refuge for hurting people. Pastors and religious educators, in speaking to the issue of child sexual abuse, demonstrate that the church community is an entirely appropriate place for such issues to be addressed. They must find ways to demonstrate that the church is a primary place where those who are hurting can feel confident in turning for comfort and healing. In their commitment to naming the injustice of child sexual abuse and to offer healing of that injustice, pastors and religious educators have many concrete options for action available to them. The suggestions that follow are not exhaustive but are meant to offer concrete assistance to those who have hesitated to address the issue of child sexual abuse in their respective congregations because they feel they do not know where to start. Consultation with congregation members as well as with members of the pastoral team and representatives of community agencies that deal directly with survivors and their families should generate other options as well as finding those which best meet the particular needs of each congregation and the survivors who dwell within it.

Naming the Injustice of Child Sexual Abuse

Pastors have a unique opportunity to speak out against the evil of child sexual abuse. Indeed, it their calling to speak out on behalf of children; they are too small and too powerless to speak for themselves and are included in the preferential option for the powerless. Community worship provides an important and established forum wherein childhood sexual abuse can be named as a concern of the entire community and not just of the victim or the offender. In publicly naming and condemning sexual abuse, pastors take the first important step in encouraging congregation members to work toward preventing it and healing the disconnection it causes. Often people who are in crisis or who need

support will first approach a pastor. Once pastors have publicly named the issue of sexual abuse they will often find that this is even more the case. Those victims who have been silent about their abuse since childhood will feel they have been given permission to share their story with the pastor or some other person whom they perceive as trustworthy. Pastors need to communicate that they and other pastoral staff are willing to hear victims and to intervene in their lives. Since survivors will be both males and females, the pastoral team should also be comprised of male and female members so that survivors can approach whichever one they feel most comfortable with.

All members of the pastoral team should be familiar with reporting laws regarding sexual abuse and with what local resources are available to survivors as well as how to access them. They should also know how to respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual abuse. Being present with survivors as they face their past and its pain does not require professional training. Rather, what a person who is a survivor of sexual abuse is asking for in the disclosure is for someone to hear his or her story with compassion and concern. This means that survivors must be allowed to freely express all their feelings about what happened to them. It also means allowing survivors to express their anger at God and their difficulty in believing that God cares for them. What survivors want from their pastors or pastoral team members, irrespective of who the offender may be, is someone who cares and who acknowledges their pain. A response that is caring and compassionate will help initiate the process of healing.

Pastoral staff or others working with survivors of abuse need to assure survivors that they cannot provide therapy but they will stand by them in their grief and healing. If survivors have not received therapy they should be encouraged to seek the services of a professional therapist. Congregations can provide financial assistance to those who cannot afford professional counselling. It is also important to remember that the healing process is different for each person. Walking with survivors requires patience with that process, assurance that healing is possible and provision of resources, as needed. Those walking with survivors need to respect their own limits and to ensure they, too, have supportive people in their own lives.

Respect and Responsibility

When the community gathers for worship, both victims and offenders are likely present. Pastors can encourage congregation members to treat both victims and offenders with the respect that their dignity as human persons requires. The church must hold out a new vision of life for both victims and offenders as well as for the families of each. This does not mean that offenders can be relieved of responsibility for their actions or for the harm they cause to victims and, in a less direct way, to society. Neither does it mean pastors or other church members should prescribe that victims or others dispense "cheap grace" upon offenders by suggesting that their victims automatically "forgive and forget." Genuine forgiveness and the healing it engenders is, as Stephen Rosetti (1995, p. 76) stated, "expensive grace", that is, it "costs" - there is pain and struggle in real reconciliation.

Study Groups on Child Sexual Abuse

Pastors and religious educators can encourage members to work on self-education on the issue of child sexual abuse. Pastors must take the leadership in promoting awareness of such issues in their congregations. Our Women's experience shows that church initiated study groups on child sexual abuse prompt survivors and their families to break their silence and to seek needed assistance in dealing with the effects of the abuse. Study groups, comprised of church members as well as members of the wider community, which allow for discussion on a wide range of questions related to child sexual abuse also encourage other congregation members to reach out to survivors and to seek ways to prevent further abuse of children from taking place. There are many community resources as well as church resources that can be tapped in this endeavour and there are many resource people who are happy to share their skills and expertise with congregations willing to grapple with the issue of child sexual abuse.

Books, pamphlets and videos that provide information about child sexual abuse and its prevention as well as books on healing can be placed in an accessible place in the church for those who want to learn more. Making resources available on an "honour system" where they can be borrowed without having to check or sign them out will ensure they are accessed by the widest range of congregation members. Listings of local resource agencies and their phone numbers should be placed in places where they can easily be seen.

Peer Support Groups

Survivors of child sexual abuse may believe that they are alone in their experience and thus feel isolated. Pastors and congregations can provide a valuable service to survivors by allowing space and supporting the formation of peer support groups where survivors can come together and support one another in making decisions about living a healthy life. Such groups can be open to survivors who are church members as well as to survivors in the wider community. A trained resource person should be available for consultation and assistance in setting up such groups. Once again there are many places where resource persons can be accessed - women's centres, mental health centres, community support agencies and pastoral care teams are but a few.

Re-examination of Church/Biblical Teachings

What are the theological teachings that are conveyed to congregations members through official church teachings, sermons, bible study and religious education programs? Do teachings on obedience, conformity or submission encourage patterns of relationship that make children vulnerable to abuse? What implications do teachings on the meaning of suffering, confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution have for survivors? for offenders? How well known are teachings that speak to the church community's mandate

to be a refuge for those in trouble? These and other questions can be the basis for discussion groups and/or sermons.

Examining the Notion of Power

Another task befitting religious educators and pastors is the fostering of critical reflection on power and the misuses of power of which child sexual abuse is but one clear representation. This means, among other things, that the church must challenge the patriarchal model of relationship which makes women and children subservient to men. Churches must be places of community where, regardless of age, gender, or position, everyone experiences shared power and where a model of power as partnership is promoted. Challenging patriarchy means also paying attention to the language that is used to speak about God, women and men. The language we use to talk about women and men influences our beliefs about them and shapes our relationships. As Our Women have shown us, the language used to name and describe God affects one's experience of the divine, oneself and others as well as one's ability to enter into loving, transforming relationship with the divine, self, others and the world. The exclusive or nearly exclusive use of masculine images and names for God along with a long history of female exclusion from positions of church authority and leadership has made a very strong connection between masculinity and the divine which both males and females have internalized. Offering many images for speaking of the divine will enrich people's language and imagination and assist them in finding those images that best reveal who God is for them. It will also help strengthen the connection between female and the divine. Stories about women and the significant contributions that women have made to the church will also help communicate to men that God is for all.

The use of inclusive language in sermons, hymns and readings is not simply a nicety; it is a necessity that recognizes that language has the power not only to shape a reality but also to define it as the only reality. Androcentric language says to all - women, men and children - that male is the norm; that female is to be seen and evaluated in relation to male; it undermines women's experience as well as their unique and significant contributions to the world thus disempowering them and rendering them invisible. Such language makes it less likely that women will perceive their own needs for health and safety as valid. It also reinforces in men the notion that they are more important than women; that they are the hub around which women and children must move; that the needs of women and children are secondary to their own. By challenging the assumptions of patriarchy, pastors and religious educators can assist children and adults alike to find a mature sense of power - one founded in a realization of their intrinsic worth and of their competence and effectiveness as human beings.

Healing and Liturgy

Congregations can incorporate prayers, litanies and readings into their community worship which simultaneously acknowledge the suffering of victims and offer hope for

their healing. The language and symbols of some rituals of healing, such as the sacrament of the sick in the Catholic church, are broad enough to touch a wide range of suffering persons in a significant way. Some victims of sexual abuse who do not attend church or others who want to celebrate their journey from disconnection to connection in a uniquely personal way may find joy and comfort in rituals which they help to create. Pastors, therapists and spiritual directors can offer assistance to victims in choosing a ritual that fits the particular needs and story of the individual. Individuals can be encouraged to think about and to choose those readings, music and symbols for use in the ritual that have particular significance for their lives. They can also be helped to discover in what setting the ritual will take place. As we've seen, the spiritual significance of sexual abuse touches not only the survivor's soul but also her body and all her relationships. Healing rituals will need to reflect the broader spiritual dimensions of the survivor's life.

Fostering Healthy Sexuality

Although human sexuality is not the exclusive domain of religious educators, they are often the ones to whom the task of providing sexual education and also moral education falls. Pastors, too, provide sexual education in their talk about what constitutes acceptable and not so acceptable sexual behaviours and the contexts within which such behaviours, in their view, may or may not occur. They and religious educators can encourage a healthy attitude toward and acceptance of human sexuality and assist parents to foster healthy attitudes in their children. They can also help correct distorted perceptions of sexuality and aggression that religious teachings or misrepresentations of them may have fostered. In so doing, they help to address an important dimension that contributes to child sexual abuse.

As part of a holistic approach to education in sexuality, pastors and religious educators must communicate their belief that human embodiment is good and that sexuality is an intrinsic dimension of human life. Human bodies, in all their variety of shapes and sizes, must be seen as part of God's creation and places wherein the divine is made incarnate. A truly incarnational theology will castigate cultural beliefs and standards of beauty that dehumanize and devalue the human body. It will also recognize the dangers inherent in failing to embrace our sexuality. A holistic understanding of sexuality will allow persons - male and female - to claim and enjoy their sexuality as integral to who they are as human persons.

A holistic understanding of sexuality is essentially counter-cultural since it presents sexuality not merely in physical and biological terms but as something which must be integrated into the total life of human persons. Such an understanding of sexuality, therefore, also places it in the context of moral and spiritual reflection.

Holistic approaches to sexuality encourage men as well as women to take responsibility for healthy, respectful expression of their sexuality in relationship and to balance responsibility to self with responsibility to others. It also recognizes children's sexuality and their need for ongoing and age appropriate education. For their protection, children need to be taught what sexual abuse is, what action they can take and how to tell someone about sexual abuse if it happens to them. Such instruction must take the

developmental needs of children into account and must be done in a manner that is sensitive to children's needs for safety and security so as not to frighten them. Churches should be and must be safe places for children to be and places where opportunities for them to talk about things that disturb or worry them are allowed. When reports of child sexual abuse are made, pastors and all church members must be ready and willing to act on behalf of the child no matter who the alleged offender is.

Education of Pastors

Pastors need opportunities for continuing education to increase their understanding of areas such as child sexual abuse, sexual violence and patriarchy. Congregation members can urge seminary directors to include such issues in the theological and pastoral training of pastors and other pastoral team members.

Pastors also need to understand the vulnerability of those who seek their help in dealing with issues such as child sexual abuse. The majority of pastors are men and need to acknowledge that, as men in a patriarchal culture, they have more power in general than women. Additional power and authority is theirs through their role as pastors. Pastors must commit themselves not to misuse or abuse their power. In the sexual domain, this means pastors must acknowledge their own vulnerability and susceptibility to inappropriate sexual behaviour and thoughts and must learn to meet their affectional and emotional needs in appropriate ways.

Male pastors need to be cautious in undertaking counselling on sexual or other deeply personal matters with females. One option is to hire a female counselor to join the parish staff. Another is to find a professional counselor who will provide supervision and feedback on the pastor's counselling ministry. Pastors who intend to do long-term counselling should ensure they have proper training. They should also understand, recognize and know how to appropriately handle issues of transference and countertransference.

The cultivation of the spiritual life of congregation members must be balanced with cultivation of the pastor's own spiritual life. Time for reflection, self-care and peer supervision are important not only for enriching and nurturing the pastor's inner life but also as a model of healthy living for congregation members.

Married pastors must make their relationship with their spouses a top priority and seek ways to keep their marriages healthy and animated. All pastors need to develop same-sex friendships that can provide emotional intimacy and the development and sharing of outside interests. They should also learn to develop healthy, nonsexual relationships with those of the opposite sex in which there is mutual respect and shared power.

By their own healthy living, male pastors can be role models for others males. In working with women and children, pastors need to know what signals in themselves might be indicating movement toward an inappropriate relationship. Meeting regularly with a mentor or peer support group where pastors can talk openly and honestly about their lives and the difficulties they experience will assist them in maintaining healthy connection with others.

Spiritual Development as a Lifelong Task

Pastors and religious educators can help people to recognize that spiritual development - like all human development - takes a lifetime and is most authentic when it addresses and fosters what is most truly human. They can speak to the process nature of development - that we are all on a journey toward becoming more fully who we are meant to be. This means that there is both continuity and change in all human lives. Although change is a normal and inevitable part of human life, it is often difficult. The changes that human beings make and are encouraged to make must be those that lead them to greater richness of personality, to deeper knowledge of self and to a closer approximation of their best and truest selves. Stories of those who, within and outside a particular tradition, have struggled to achieve high levels of spiritual/human development may be offered for reflection and as signs of hope, breakthroughs of spirit. People's own stories, which reveal much about their spiritual lives, will supply pastors and religious educators a rich supply of material to use in their work of encouraging reflection and development in the lives of those whom they serve.

Considerations for Spiritual Directors

Anyone entering spiritual direction will also have psychological concerns that have an inherent impact on their spirituality. Body, mind and spirit are all facets of the unified being of human persons. Thus, spiritual directors will benefit from exposure to contemporary psychological thinking and an understanding of human development. While the work of the therapist and the spiritual director will be similar, most will agree that their concerns are not entirely identical. It seems reasonable to assume that spiritual directors will operate from a ground that is specifically and overtly "religious" or "spiritual". Also, the ground from which the spiritual director works will often reflect a particular religious tradition to which the survivor also belongs. The same cannot be assumed of therapy or therapists.

The temptation for therapists may be to view the survivor of sexual abuse as having psychological problems that can be addressed only through what are generally understood to be psychological interventions. The spiritual director working with a survivor might believe that she is having a spiritual difficulty that can be solely corrected by exercises such as meditating on scripture or prayer. This writer's experience as well as that of Our Women is that the difficulties experienced by survivors of sexual abuse involve both spiritual and psychological dimensions.

Correcting Distorted Images of God

As we've seen, survivors' images of God are often distorted and can take many forms. The distorted images that abused children form eventually become an integral part of their spirituality and they grows up believing that they are the "truth" about God. Such images are not automatically corrected simply by the act of growing older. The pain of survivors'

anger toward God may be personally uncomfortable for or unfamiliar to the spiritual director who does not understand the deep pain the survivor has endured. Spiritual directors, like therapists and pastors, need to be prepared for and open to the survivor's pain.

Spiritual directors must also avoid giving formulas or "pat" answers: "Trust in God and all will be okay." Survivors may interpret such answers to mean that they don't have enough faith or that they should be "past" the abuse by now or that they are displeasing to God and, as such, they only serve to increase the survivors' pain and confusion. Similarly, an answer such as the one Denise received - "You don't need me, you need a psychiatrist" - may say to survivors that God is neither interested in nor cares about their pain or that there is no place for someone like them among "the people of God." What such an answer may really mean is that the spiritual director does not know how to respond to a revelation of sexual abuse or how to help the survivor heal. If this is the case, the spiritual director needs to state his or her limits and seek ways to work with the survivor and others, such as a therapist, so that the needs of the survivor can best be met.

The spiritual director needs to be aware that survivors may take a long time to restore their broken relationship with God and to change their negative feelings toward God. The spiritual director's most persuasive and articulate arguments will not convince the survivor of God's fidelity or presence. The spiritual director can best serve the survivor by accepting his/her feelings toward God. The survivor's relationship with God will need to be role-modeled again within the context of caring and trusting relationships. The spiritual director's presence to and relationship with the survivor can be a model of how to relate in healthy ways with other persons as a pattern for developing a healthy relationship with God.

Through their work with survivors, spiritual directors can help the survivors to discover images of God that help them see God as kind, compassionate, caring and present. Spiritual directors can also assist survivors in working through the meaning of specific teachings of their respective religious traditions and to understand them in ways that are more life-affirming.

The Meaning of Suffering

Spiritual directors will also need to be aware of how the survivors' images and understandings of God affect their understanding of themselves and of what they believe God wants of them. Our Women show, for example, that if survivors have been taught that suffering is a punishment from God for sin, they may misconstrue their experience of sexual abuse as something for which they are guilty and for which they must be punished or they may see the abuse itself as God's punishment for some other action they deem sinful. Assuring survivors that they are not responsible for the abuse and helping them understand the difference between voluntary and involuntary suffering will go along way to correcting mistaken and unhelpful notions about God. Voluntary suffering may be deliberately chosen as a means to a greater good. The actions of Mahatma Ghandi or

Martin Luther King are but two examples. Childhood sexual abuse, however, is never chosen and can never be justified. All that can be done to prevent it must be done.

In retrospect, survivors may realize that, through working through their suffering, they have learned new things about themselves and about God and that they have achieved a more mature spirituality. Such an end is most likely to be achieved if survivors receive support and affirmation throughout the experience rather than too ready assurances that "things will work out" or that they "will learn something" from their pain. Survivors' awareness of suffering as the occasion for growth should come from within themselves and at a time when they are well on the road to healing. A spiritual director can assist survivors in their healing by waiting until some growth and healing have occurred to affirm the reality that they have come through a difficult situation. It will not be helpful for any spiritual director to suggest as a retrospective explanation that God allowed the survivor's abuse so that s/he could know God's love or so that s/he might achieve spiritual growth. This is an erroneous assumption about God - God does not will suffering for people; nevertheless, people do suffer. As Our Women have shown, the real question of suffering is not "why?" but what can survivors do with their suffering.

Forgiveness

Survivors often need help in understanding the meaning of forgiveness. Spiritual directors have a unique role to play in helping survivors learn what the limits and benefits of genuine forgiveness are and in correcting what Our Women's experience demonstrates are often mistaken notions about what forgiveness really entails. Misconceptions about forgiveness are many; among them are ideas such as to forgive is to forget; the offender was "sick" or drunk or his wife didn't meet his needs therefore his actions should be excused; survivors, as Christians, are called to be peacemakers therefore they shouldn't create conflict by talking about the abuse; forgiveness can be exchanged simply through saying "I'm sorry" without accompanying evidence of personal responsibility to change. Spiritual directors can help survivors understand that forgiveness is a process which cannot be undertaken successfully until the underlying pain is acknowledged and dealt with. They must also be aware that survivors, motivated by a desire to do the "right" thing or to have things "over and done with" because their pain is great, can express forgiveness prematurely. As Augsberger (1981) notes "Forgiveness is a journey of many steps, each of which can be difficult, all of which are to be taken carefully, thoughtfully, and with deep reflection (p. 30)." The spiritual director can provide the survivor with the support and guidance needed for successful negotiation of such a journey.

Permission to do What is Needed

Some survivors will choose to work with a therapist and a spiritual director simultaneously. Others, like some of Our Women, will seek the assistance of a spiritual director only after they have been in therapy and have resolved some of the main issues related to their past abuse. Still others may go to a spiritual director when the therapist is

not open to spiritual issues. In either case, spiritual directors may sometimes need to suggest that a survivor take a break from spiritual direction while s/he works through a particularly difficult clinical issue. It is easy for some survivors to interpret a self-chosen break as an indicator of spiritual idleness or laziness and to become caught in further guilt and self-blame. In such a case, the spiritual director will have to "prescribe" the needed break. In so doing, however, the spiritual director will also need to be mindful of the significance of the issues of abandonment and separation for survivors and to communicate an openness to having the survivor return at a later date. Keeping in touch with the survivor at periodic intervals and supporting his/her return to spiritual direction when ready can be important acts of healing.

Psychological Functioning as a Key to Level of Spiritual Maturity

Genia's five stage model of spiritual development offers some insight into the connection between a person's spiritual and psychological functioning. She notes that some adults may be spiritually immature because of early developmental failures. Our Women's experience bears out Genia's conclusion while also showing that survivors can move to higher levels of spirituality. Our Women's experience also demonstrated Genia's contention that spiritual development is interdependent with and generally congruent with other facets of personality and development. Spiritual directors can use Genia's model and the criteria for spiritual maturity set out earlier in this study as a guide to help them determine where a particular survivor is in his/her spiritual development and to plan effective interventions for helping him/her move forward in the spiritual journey.

Living the Question

The hermeneutic-phenomenological thrust of this study has been directed toward the creation of a text that discloses a strong interpretation of female survivors' lives, one that shows the hopes as well as the challenges that resolving the spiritual trauma of childhood sexual abuse can bring. Writing and reflection have been the principal means through which understanding has been sought. This attempt always carries with it the implicit recognition that the depth of the experience may not be adequately conveyed. The hope, however, is that the text reveals the multilayered complexity of human life.

The question which began this study is now, at then end, still present. This is as it should be; all questions of this nature are ongoing. As Gadamer (1975) observed, it is in the relationship between questioning and understanding, between veiling and revealing, that the hermeneutic enterprise is accomplished. It is also what makes the enterprise a difficult one. Our Women's understanding of their experience and its meaning for their lives is not complete. Their lives will continue to change and so will ours. Change, as Christina Baldwin (1977) noted, "is the constant, the signal for rebirth, the egg of the phoenix." This text has revealed some important aspects of Our Women's lives in tracing the development of their spirituality but some aspects may yet be veiled. It has offered some personal and yet unfinished views for consideration by various readers. Openness to

knowing more and knowing more deeply must remain. "Be(ing) patient...Learn(ing) to love" as well as "live the questions" is to know that "it is the journey that matters in the end" and that "what may seem like the end may also be only the beginning."

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APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name	Age at time of study	Age at which sexual abuse began	Offender'(s) relationship to participant	Religious affiliation in childhood
Denise	46	3	Older brother Uncle Brother-in-law	Roman Catholic
Fiona	42	Remembers from age 5 but abuse probably began earlier	Mother Grandmother	Native Introduction to christianity in residential school
Hyacinth	62	3	Playmate's uncle	Roman Catholic
Ruth	42	pre age 5	Mother Older brother	Native and Christian
Sofia	56	4	Family friend Teenaged neighbour	Roman Catholic
Valerie	57	5	Father	None

APPENDIX B

Research Study

Request for Participation

Project Title: **Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse and Spirituality**

Investigator: **Heather Jamieson, Doctoral Student**
Department of Educational Psychology, U of A

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the effects of child sexual abuse upon female survivors' understanding and experience of spirituality.

You are being asked to participate in two interviews which will involve a total of about three hours. During the interviews, you will be asked about your experience of sexual abuse and its impact upon your spirituality as well as questions about how you understand and experience your spirituality now. These interviews are **not** intended to be therapy sessions, but rather are opportunities for you to tell your story as part of the proposed research project.

The interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed into written form. You may be asked to review the transcription for accuracy. All information will be kept confidential. At the end of the research, the tapes will be erased. The information from this study may be published, but your name will not be associated with the research. Should you agree to participate, a formal explanation and a formal release form will fully explain the confidentiality of the study, your right to refuse to answer specific questions and your right to opt out of the study at any time.

To participate in this study, you must be an English-speaking adult female survivor of childhood sexual abuse (twenty years of age or older) for whom spirituality is a related issue. If you are interested in participating or learning more about this study, please contact me at the following number: 436-3891.

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse and Spirituality
INVESTIGATOR: Heather Jamieson Phone: 436-3891 (H) 492-0961 (W)

I _____ voluntarily consent to participate in this project.
(*print* name here)

The purpose of this research project is to examine the effects of child sexual abuse upon adult female survivors' understanding and experience of spirituality.

I am being asked to participate in two or three interviews of about one hour each. During these interviews, questions about my childhood experience of sexual abuse and its impact upon my spirituality as well as questions about how I understand and experience my spirituality now will be asked.

These interviews are not intended to be therapy sessions but rather opportunities for me to tell my story as part of the proposed research. From the information which I give new perspectives on the impact of child sexual abuse, the counseling process and/or religious education approaches may emerge.

I agree to be interviewed and to allow these interviews to be audio-taped and transcribed. All tape recordings and transcripts will be stored in a secure place, along with other relevant data that is shared with the researcher.

I understand that at the completion of the research, the tapes will be erased. All names, pseudonyms and addresses will also be destroyed at the end of the study. I understand that the information will be used solely for research purposes and published in the form of a thesis or otherwise and that my name will not be associated with the research.

I understand that I am free not to answer specific questions. I also understand that I can withdraw my consent and terminate my participation at any time without prejudice.

I have been given an opportunity to ask whatever questions I want and all such questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE _____

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____